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## LETTERS from the SPANISH CIVIL WAR



A U.S. Volunteer Writes Home  
Edited by Peter N. Carroll and Fraser Ottanelli

## LETTERS FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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# LETTERS

## Solitary Confinement

While reading Fenton Johnson's essay ["Going It Alone," Folio, April], I found myself thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer, a notorious misanthrope who, in solitude, developed one of the most cogent and logical analyses of the human condition of any philosopher to date.

Schopenhauer never married. In the last third of his life, from the age of forty-five until his death, he lived alone (though he did keep French poodles, named Atma and Butz) in Frankfurt and followed an unvarying daily schedule. He awoke each morning at seven o'clock and washed. After having a cup of coffee in lieu of breakfast, he wrote at his desk until noon, when, satisfied with his work for the day, he practiced the flute for thirty minutes. For lunch he frequented the Englischer Hof, an inn near the city center, and afterward he read at home until four o'clock, at which time he took a two-hour walk, even in bad weather. At six he visited the library to read the newspa-

per. He went out in the evening, perhaps to a concert or the theater, and to have dinner, and returned home before ten o'clock. He retired early, unless he was entertaining a guest, which happened occasionally. He died at home, at the age of seventy-two, and was found sitting in his armchair by his physician.

It was Schopenhauer's solitude that gave him room to explore the human condition with astounding depth and clarity. In my life, there has not been much room for solitude—except when I surf. Out in the ocean, idling alone on a surfboard while waiting for waves to swell up from the surface affords a couple of solitary hours. The quiet of such moments is golden.

Terry Dressler  
Goleta, Calif.

Fenton Johnson's assertion that "solitaries" have an influence on history that is quiet yet powerful recalls Hermann Hesse's essay "War and Peace," in which Hesse writes about "the knowledge of the living substance in us ... of the secret magic, the secret godliness that each of us bears within him."

Hesse makes the claim that peace in the world will not come about

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through “commandments” or “practical experience”—just as Johnson argues that reversing the great noise of unreflective contemporary life “requires no trillion-dollar investment.” By simply sitting and reading—or not reading—we each have the resources we need to affect the world indelibly.

Mark Trecka  
Chicago, Ill.

Fenton Johnson’s glorification of suffering mars his otherwise valuable discussion of solitude. His rhetorical question, “How else do we learn the dimensions and power of love except through suffering?” invites other questions. How about through shared joy? Don’t the thrill of passion and the marvelously reassuring dependability of long-term intimacy teach us plenty about the dimensions and power of love? Although Johnson says that “the path to liberation runs through suffering,” I have always experienced suffering as far less liberating than joy.

Johnson writes, “The call to unrestrained consumption ... is trotted before us at every hour of every day in every popular medium.” But we are living in a therapeutic age at least as much as in a consumerist one. America’s culture of therapy invites us to treat suffering as an opportunity for personal growth, imposing an extra burden on those who have more than enough to contend with and encouraging their families and friends to be unsympathetic if the sufferers fail to measure up.

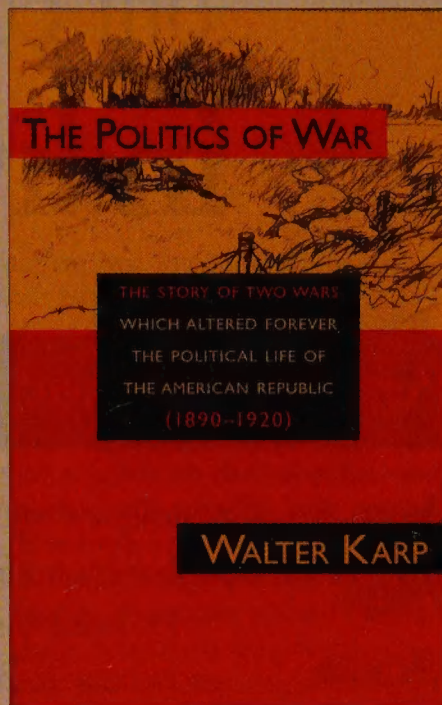
Felicia Nimue Ackerman  
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## Corrections

A review by Terry Castle [New Music, May] misstates the given name of a jazz musician. He is Albert Ayler, not Alfred Ayler. In the same review, Robin Williamson’s place of residence is incorrectly identified. Williamson lives in Cardiff, Wales, not in California. We regret the errors.

# Walter Karp

A contributing editor of *Harper’s Magazine* for eleven years before his death, Walter Karp was a journalist and political historian whose incisive commentary on government evokes a fierce love of democracy.



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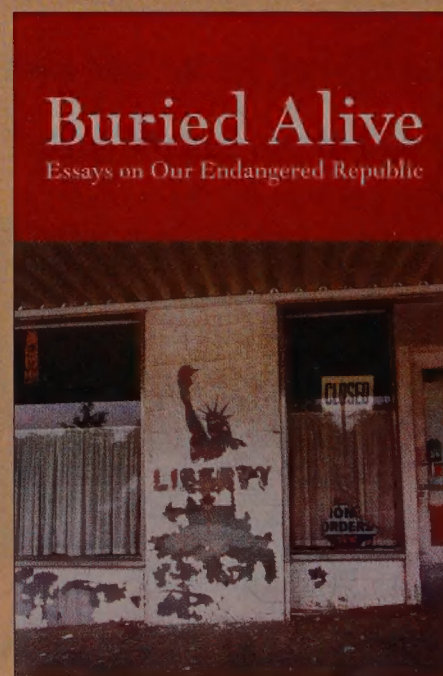
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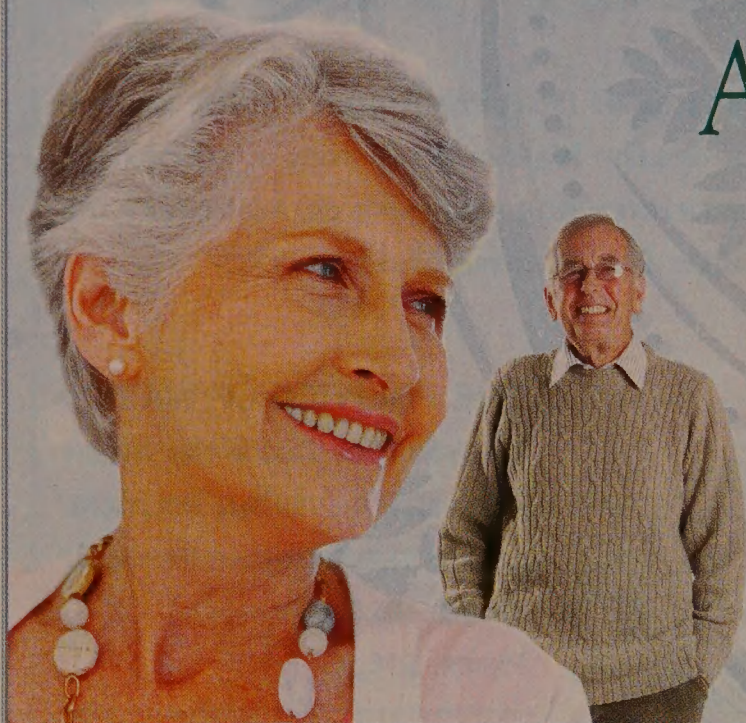
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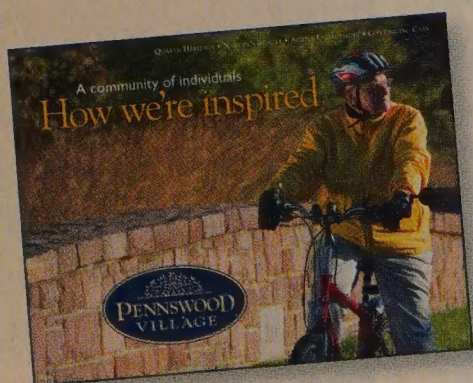
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# EASY CHAIR

Dressed to Kill  
By John Crowley

For my birthday last year, my wife bought me three hours with Chris Davis, a master falconer and breeder of hawks. My time would be spent meeting the hawks that Davis flies and following them into the scrubby woods and deadfalls behind the buildings of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. I went with another man who'd gotten the trip as a birthday present from his wife.

Davis has been a master falconer since 1979, but, technically speaking—the language of hawking and falconry is extensive and ancient, like the language of heraldry—on the day of my visit he was an austringer, a handler of hawks. Davis raises Harris's hawks, a species native to the American Southwest. "Harris's are the only hawks that hunt in packs, like wolves," he told us, "and for the same reason: their usual prey in their native environment—jackrabbits—are larger than they are." The birds looked plenty big when Davis took two of them from his van, holding them on his heavy glove by the jesses—straps attached to the hawks' anklets. They had a look of malevolent intensity, like movie villains, but they were so schooled in the rules of their world that we two beginners could hold up a glove topped with a piece of raw beef and the hawk would fly to us, settle, and eat. The grip of their big feet was remarkable. Indeed, this raptor grip was the thing that had drawn us to them: unlike other bird-

watchers, we were there not only to watch hawks but—if we were lucky—to watch them kill something.

We *were* lucky: after we'd bush-whacked for a while, following the hawks from tree to tree, one chased down a squirrel that she'd roused from the very pine she was perched in. She circled down inches from the trunk, great wings beating, repeatedly missing the racing squirrel until it made a last-ditch leap from some twenty feet up. She caught it on the fly. It was beautiful and elating to witness the chase, the flight, the skill—both of the hawk and of the squirrel. On the ground the hawk mantled, lifting her wings like Dracula's cloak to hide the prize.

Falcons kill quickly, by biting the neck and breaking the spinal cord of their prey, Davis had explained to us, but Harris's hawks kill with their feet, stopping the heart by compression. (To us, the quicker death has the appearance of mercy, but it's obviously a plus for the predator—your dinner can't wriggle away.) Davis took the squirrel from the hawks and gave them some mice he'd brought along. "They'd be hours eating this squirrel," he said. He kept it, though, to give them later—or maybe to eat himself. "It's very sweet meat."

Some people have told Davis that while they'd love to watch and hold his hawks they really don't want to see any animals hurt. And yet to watch hawks at work is to en-

ter into the process of death. In her recent memoir, *H Is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald says that she's loved hawks and falconry from childhood, when they existed for her mostly in books; she learned the lore and the language, the science and the mythology of raptors, and later came to train and fly hawks herself, including a Harris's. Her book is about acquiring and raising a goshawk, a larger bird that is known for being temperamental. She named her goshawk Mabel. Macdonald made sure the rabbits Mabel caught were dead before the hawk began to eat them; her human sense of the animals' suffering ended with their deaths, but the association of death with suffering is hard to break, even for the trainer and devotee of a large and efficient killer.

"What am I going to do with the hawk?" Macdonald wonders at the start of Mabel's training. "Kill things. Make death." Hawks, like wolves, like lions, are innocent, but to enable, enjoy, and admire their prowess does bring uneasiness to many present-day humans, an uneasiness of the sort that makes for thought.

We—our kind, humankind—are unique among animals in knowing that we will die. We are also the only animals who know that everything else that lives will die, too. Montaigne notes that the animals we keep (people in his time lived in proximity to more species than we do today) are

afraid of being hurt by their human masters and take care to avoid pain. "But that we should kill them, they cannot fear, nor have they the faculty to imagine and conclude such a thing as death." An animal pursued by a predator is certainly aware of threat, danger, and extremity, and expends all its energies and wits to avoid capture, but it doesn't know death is imminent even when it's seized. This knowledge unique to us shapes our relations with nonhuman species as much as it shapes our sense of ourselves.

Countless tales have been told about animals, and the animals in these tales differ from the beings we know in the world and from the hawk in Macdonald's account. They generally have consciousnesses like our own; in many fictions they talk to one another and sometimes they talk to people. In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), the masterly taxonomy that John Clute co-edited with John Grant, Clute distinguishes among various forms of Animal Fantasy. In the Beast Fable, for instance, animals (such as those in Aesop) enact allegorical or satirical versions of human behavior. Talking Animals can also help or counsel human protagonists. (I suppose Puss in Boots is an example.) But the "pure" Animal Fantasy, he says,

is a tale which features sentient animals who almost certainly talk to one another and to other animal species, though not to humans, and who are described in terms which emphasize both their animal nature and the characteristic nature of the species to which they belong. A pure AF will almost certainly be set in the real world, and will usually teach its readers some natural history. . . . In the pure AF the initiating fantasy premise tends to dissolve into a narrative which heeds the laws of the world. Because they exist in the world and because the communities they depict are subject to the laws of nature, AFs tend to end in tragedy. To tell a pure AF is, ultimately, to depart from fantasy.

In "Tarka the Otter" (1927), a classic story by the British writer Henry Williamson, the otters and

foxes and other animals don't talk, even to their own kind. Unlike Helen Macdonald's Mabel, Tarka is a fictional character; the story imagines its way into his consciousness and into his particular tragedy: his mate dies, his son is caught and killed, and so, too, in the end, is Tarka himself. Buck, a dog in Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, thinks much like a human—in effect, he talks to himself. But though he understands many human words, he doesn't speak to other dogs or to people, and the animals he consorts with are subject to their natures.

The animal tales for children that Thornton W. Burgess published for decades beginning in 1910 are meant to teach some natural history; his animals behave as real animals do. Reddy Fox chases Peter Rabbit; Buster Bear hibernates; Sammy Jay warns others of danger, often danger coming from Farmer Brown's boy and his gun, or from the hound, Bowser. Though the animals talk to one another at length and never to humans, they depart from the pure Animal Fantasy in another way. Burgess never explicitly says so, but the illustrations by his friend and collaborator Harrison Cady reveal that the animals who populate the Green Meadow and the Laughing Brook and the Old Pasture are clothed: they wear an array of jackets and vests, straw hats and overalls, spats and watch chains. Some carry rolled umbrellas under their wings, or peer through spectacles.

For all the reliable natural history retailed by the Burgess stories, then, the animals remain fantastic. But Clute points out a curious rule: the animals in Burgess that belong mostly to the human world—the farmhouse chickens, Bowser the hound—are not clothed. Nor are the animals that are killed: Mr. Goshawk wears a muffler, but the dead chicken in his talons is naked (if an animal can be said to be naked). The clothed animals, on the other hand—whose names we know and whose speech we understand—are never killed or eaten. They are often at risk, but Reddy Fox never catches Peter, and Bowser never catches Reddy.

A similar state of affairs can be seen in the stories of Beatrix Potter. Potter did her own illustrations, and in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck* we first see Jemima as an ordinary duck in the farmyard. When she goes off to find a place to lay and hatch her eggs by herself, however, she wears "a shawl and a poke bonnet." She comes upon "an elegantly dressed gentleman reading a newspaper" who has "black prick ears and sandy coloured whiskers" and who nearly succeeds in cooking her. Eventually Kep the dog and two foxhound puppies—all in their skins alone—rescue her from the fox, and once she is back in the farmyard Jemima is again pictured without clothes.

The rule then is that the animals in these fantasies whose lives are described naturalistically can talk, if they talk at all, only to one another and not to people. They can die, and since they resemble us in knowing this fact, their tales can be (though they need not be) tragic. But talking animals in clothes can't die. This is not because they are incapable of imagining death, as real animals are, but because their hats and shirts and petticoats somehow create for them an Eden in which self-awareness and speech exist but death does not. It's an odd inversion of the Eden in the Hebrew Bible, a place defined not only by the absence of death but also by the absence of clothes, which enter the world at the same time as death and with something of the same import. It's when God discovers that Adam is ashamed of being naked that He knows he has eaten the forbidden fruit. *Who told thee that thou wast naked?*

Before they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve weren't different from the other animals: they didn't know they would die. It wasn't the fact of death that their rebellion brought into the world, but the consciousness of personal death: a Fall—if it was a fall—that so far as we know separates us from the rest of creation, which to that degree we can never rejoin.

Hunters and others have often witnessed animals at the point of being killed suddenly cease to struggle

or seek escape, as though they were resigning themselves to death. But this phenomenon may be caused by simple physiological shock; in any case it is different from the ability to “imagine and conclude such a thing as death,” as Montaigne put it. That doesn’t mean that other animals’ lives are necessarily freer than human lives from the pain resulting from death. Helen Macdonald started training her goshawk to anneal the pain of losing her father; she wanted, she says, to be a hawk: “solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life.” But hawks have mates; red-tailed hawks mate for life, and many birds mourn long for a lost mate. The dog who refuses to leave the grave of his master is a commonplace. Chimpanzee mothers have been known to carry a dead infant until it falls to pieces. “I have seen mother elk grieve after the loss of their calves,” Cora Anne Romanow, a University of Winnipeg biologist who studies animal expressivity, wrote to me. “One mom stood right in the spot her calf had been removed from (his dead body had been picked up by the ranch owner) and defended the spot as if her baby was still there.” Mourning is an unresolvable consciousness of absence.

All these hard things we share to varying degrees with the whole of feeling creation, but not the knowledge that death is waiting up ahead. Knowing that we and all those we love must die might actually mitigate human grief; the Stoics thought it did. But it’s a tough sell. If we have to die, what’s the point of living? Is there any meaning in life that death doesn’t obviate? “All this had been so long known to all,” Leo Tolstoy wrote in *A Confession*, his recounting of a midlife spiritual crisis:

Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms.... Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist.... How can man fail to see this? And how go on living?

The Apostle Paul appears to have been one of those people who

are profoundly offended by the fact of death, a hatred reflected in the ecstasy of his discovering a new and universal possibility: that though dead we can live, that death will die at last and we will be raised incorruptible. All of us. Not restored to physical life by the intervention of the gods or by a wise physician or by magic, not persisting in a dim afterlife inaccessible to the living except by imagination, but raised up in new bodies from the grave in the very course of things, never to die again. How? It’s a mystery. Placed at the end of a world-story that begins with the fall into knowledge of the innocent couple in the garden, Paul’s revelation offers to believers perhaps the only complete antidote to the catastrophe of learning that you will die: the promise that you will not, not really. What a relief!

I am among those who are not particularly discouraged by the prospect of being dead for good, though I am unsettled by the prospect of dying: of being seized by death unawares, like prey. We can imagine the sudden onset of mortality—heart attack, stroke—far more vividly than we can nonexistence. I am with Wittgenstein in concluding that my death ends the world, though of course at the same time I know that the world in all its particulars will continue without me. Although I can’t resolve that paradox, I have thought that what I’d prefer to being dead is not more active life in an incorruptible Pauline body escaped from the tomb, but merely continued possession of the life behind me, so that it isn’t lost. I know I won’t in fact miss that life when it’s gone, or when I am, but still the loss of it all seems a shame. Were I to imagine instead (as I sometimes do) a world free of the certainty of death, I think I’d choose the one I first entered long ago, where a variety of animals in a variety of clothes converse and learn, where our friends chase and are chased but are never caught. “I like your clothes awfully, old chap,” says the Water Rat to the Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*. “I’m going to get a black velvet smoking-suit myself some day, as soon as I can afford it.” ■

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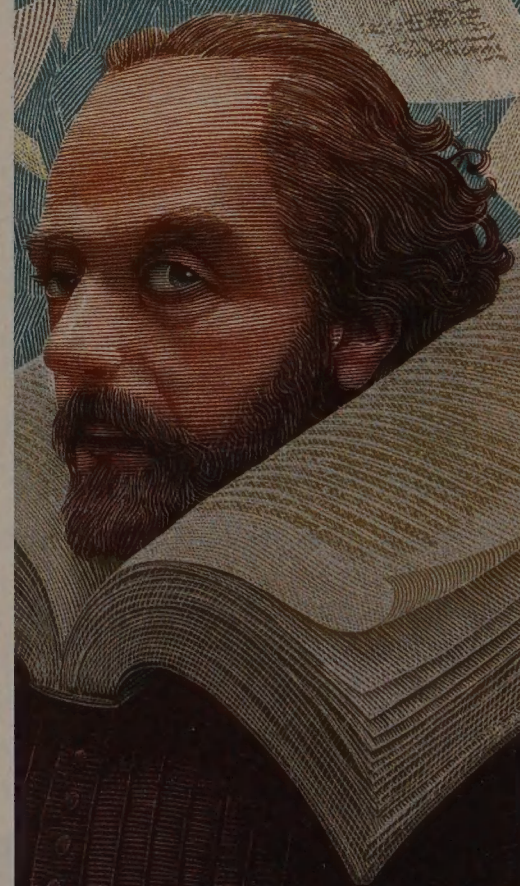
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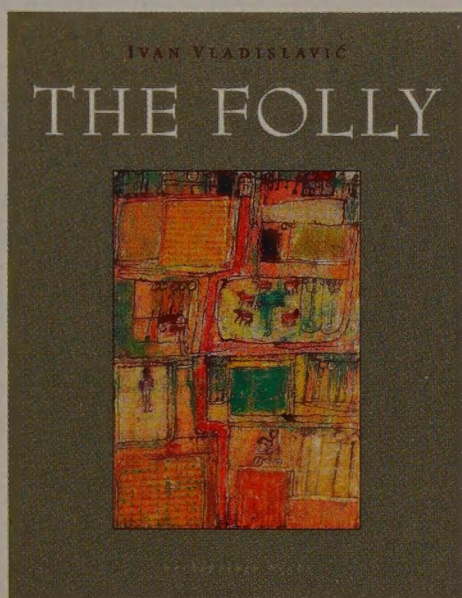


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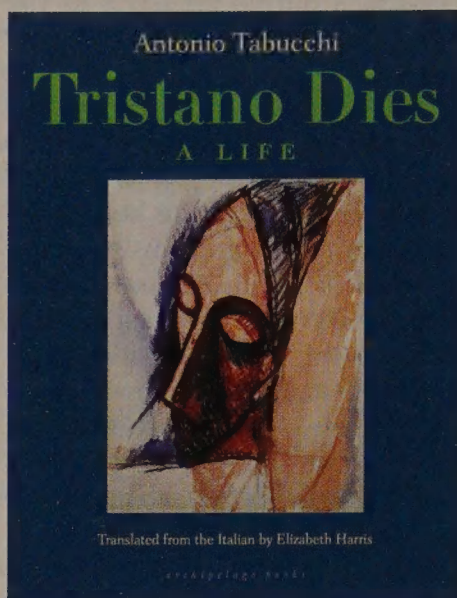
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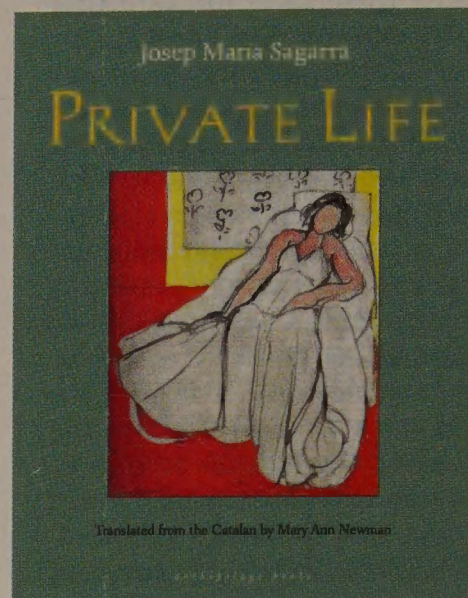
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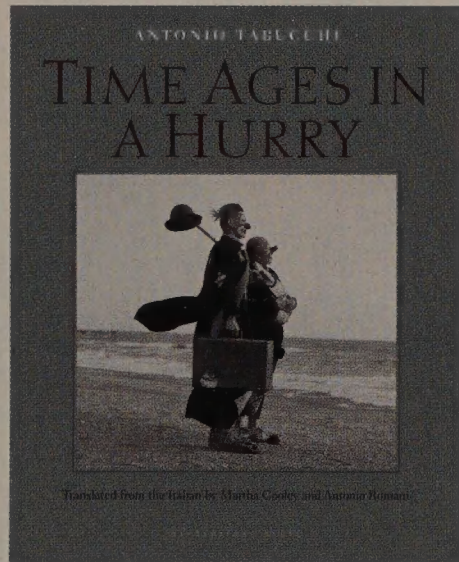
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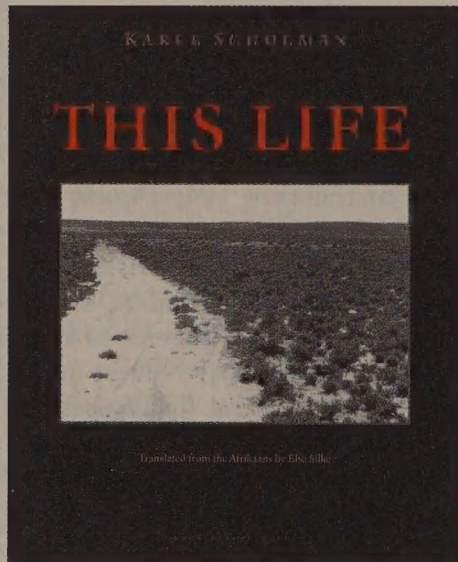
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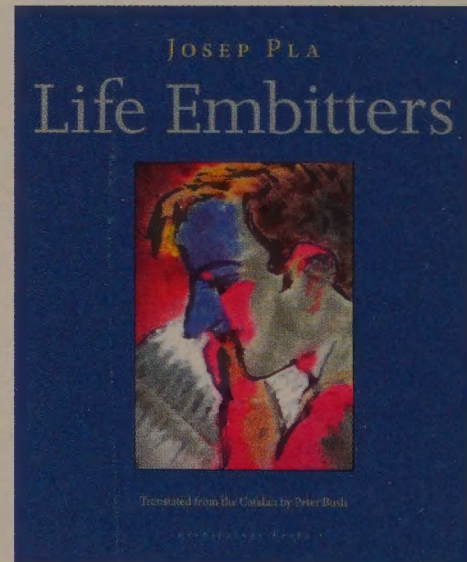
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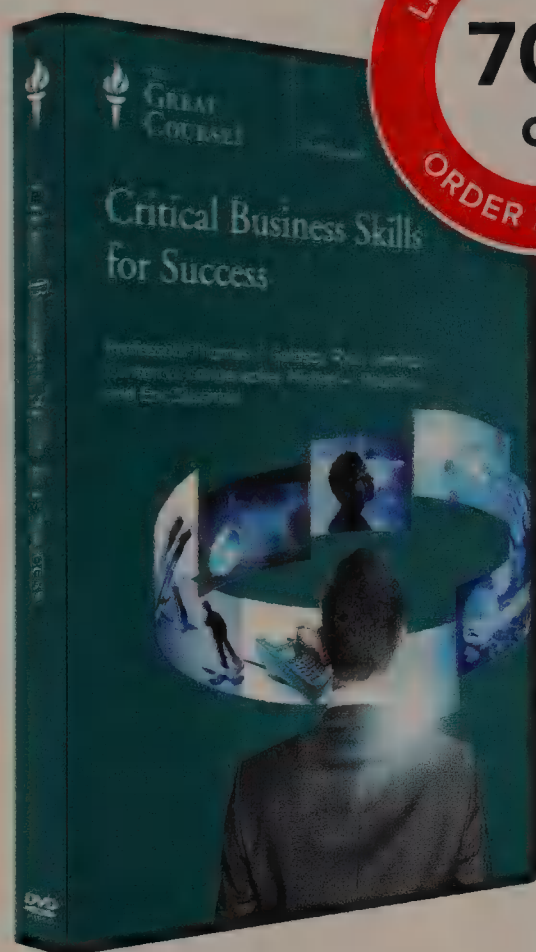
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# READINGS

[Essay]

## ARS EROTICA

By Mario Vargas Llosa, from *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, out next month from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Vargas Llosa, who is the author of more than a dozen novels, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010. Translated from the Spanish by John King.

A few years ago, a small media storm erupted in Spain when the Socialist government in the region of Extremadura introduced, as part of its sex-education curriculum, masturbation workshops for girls and boys over the age of thirteen—a program that it somewhat mischievously called *Pleasure Is in Your Own Hands*. Faced with protests, the regional government argued that sex education for children was necessary to “prevent undesirable pregnancies” and that masturbation classes would help young people “avoid greater ills.” In the ensuing debate, the regional government of Extremadura received support from the regional government of Andalucía, which announced that it would soon roll out a similar program. An attempt by an organization close to the Popular Party to close down the masturbation workshops by way of a legal challenge—called, equally mischievously, *Clean Hands*—failed when the public prosecutor’s office refused to take up the complaint.

How things have changed since my childhood, when the Salesian fathers and La Salle brothers who ran the schools scared us with the idea that “improper touching” caused blindness, tuberculosis, and insanity. Six decades later schools have jerking-off classes. Now that is progress.

But is it really? I acknowledge the good intentions behind the program and I concede that

campaigns of this sort might well lead to a reduction in unwanted pregnancies. My criticism is of a sensual nature. Instead of liberating children from the superstitions, lies, and prejudices that have traditionally surrounded sex, might these masturbation workshops trivialize the act even more than it has already been trivialized in today’s society? Might they continue the process of turning sex into an exercise without mystery, dissociating it from feeling and passion, and thus depriving future generations of a source of pleasure that has long nurtured human imagination and creativity?

Masturbation does not have to be taught; it can be discovered in private. It is one of the activities that compose our private lives. It helps boys and girls break out of their family environment, making them individual and revealing to them the secret world of desire. To destroy these private rituals and put an end to discretion and shame—which have accompanied sex since the beginning of civilization—is to deprive sex of the dimension it took on when culture turned it into a work of art. The disappearance of the idea of form in sexual matters—like its disappearance from art and literature—is a kind of regression. It reduces sex to something purely instinctive and animalistic. Masturbation classes in schools might do away with stupid prejudices, but they are also another stab at the heart of eroticism—perhaps a fatal one. And who would benefit from eroticism’s final death? Not the libertarians and the libertines, but the puritans and the churches.

Of course, these workshops are only a minor manifestation of a sexual liberation that is among modern democratic society’s most important achievements. They are another step in the ongoing effort to do away with the religious and ideological restrictions that have constrained sexual behavior from time immemorial, causing enormous suffering. This movement has had many

healthy consequences, especially for women and sexual minorities. Repression was long the cause of frustration, neurosis, and other psychic disorders in people who had been the victims of discrimination and censorship, whose activities were condemned

[Equipment]

## STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

*From descriptions of sex-tracking apps included in "Quantified Sex," an article by Deborah Lupton, an Australian sociologist, that was published in the April 2015 issue of Culture, Health & Sexuality.*

**Sex Partner Tracker:** Users document number of partners, geographical location, and the frequency of sexual activity. The data then allows users to determine "who is the lover with the highest score within your region/world." The app also purports to demonstrate who among its users have had sex with one another.

**Sex Stamina Tester:** Users place their smart device on their beds and measure sexual stamina (how long sex lasts). This app is obviously directed at men, but women are also encouraged to identify their partners' "rank" among sexual athletes.

**Enigma Sex Tracker:** Directed at men but involves the use of data from female partners concerning ovulation and menstrual cycles. This data is inputted into a calendar along with frequency of sexual activity. According to the blurb, "Men do not always understand women," and knowing more about their reproductive cycles will help determine when female partners are more likely to be "sexually receptive."

**Sexperience:** Users keep records of how many sexual partners they have had. ("Sometimes you may sit and ponder the number, and wish you knew the exact amount just for personal satisfaction.") Also allows users to record "how good" the experience was and how long it was and "generate all kinds of exciting and mathematical reports."

**Spreadsheets:** Measures movement and sound levels. The app's algorithms give statistical analyses of performance, providing a visual display of noise level, average thrusts per minute, and duration of intercourse. The description of a similar app, iBang, notes that it produces graphs visualizing the data collected, which, "for the brave," can be shared to Facebook or Twitter.

to precarious secrecy by the rigidity of the dominant moral code. Women today now enjoy, if not exactly the same freedom as men, at least a degree of sexual autonomy that is infinitely greater than what their grandmothers possessed. Prejudice and hostility against homosexuality have been reduced, even if they have not disappeared. Above all, an idea is gaining ground that in sexual matters what adults of sound mind do or do not do is a decision in which nobody, not the state or the church, should interfere.

All of this is progress. But it is wrong to believe, as do many promoters of sexual liberation, that demystifying sex—abolishing any symbolic transgression from the sexual act—will make it simply a healthy, normal activity. Sex is healthy and normal only among animals. It was healthy and normal for bipeds before they were completely human, when sex was little more than an instinct, a physical discharge of energy that guaranteed reproduction. The move away from an animal state was a long and complex process for our species, a process in which a decisive role was played by the world of culture and invention that Karl Popper called the "third world." Culture entails the gradual emergence of sovereign individuals, their emancipation from the tribe, the development of leanings, aptitudes, wishes, and desires that differentiate them from others and define them as singular beings. Sex played an essential role in this process. As Sigmund Freud showed, the sexual domain, the most recondite area of individual sovereignty, is where the distinctive features of every personality—those which belong to each of us and make us different from others—are developed. It is a private and secret domain, and we should try to keep it this way if we do not wish to cut off one of the most intense sources of pleasure and creativity—that is, of civilization itself.

**I**n the darkness of earliest times, animals and humans alike engaged in a physical coupling without mystery, without grace, without subtlety, and without love. The humanization of the lives of men and women was a long process in which the advance of scientific knowledge and philosophical and religious ideas all played their parts, as did the development of arts and letters. But nothing changed as much as our sex lives did. This change has been a stimulus of artistic and literary creation; in reciprocal fashion, painting, literature, music, sculpture, and dance—all the artistic manifestations of human imagination—have contributed to the enrichment of pleasure in sexual activity. It would not be outrageous to say that eroticism marks a high point of civilization or that it is one of civilization's defining characteristics. There is no better way to gauge how primitive a community is or how far it has advanced in civilization than to scrutinize the



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"Christmas Tree," a photograph by Elizabeth Moran from *The Armory*, a series that documents pornography-video sets at the headquarters of Kink.com, in the San Francisco Armory.

secrets of the bedroom and to find out how its inhabitants make love.

There are many ways to define eroticism, but the best might be to call it physical love stripped of animality. The satisfaction of an instinctive urge becomes a shared creative activity that prolongs and sublimates physical pleasure, providing a *mise-en-scène* that turns it into a work of art. But eroticism does not only have the dignifying function of adding beauty to physical pleasure, opening up a wide range of suggestions and possibilities through which human beings can satisfy their desires and fantasies. It also brings to the surface those specters, usually hidden in the irrational part of our natures, that are lethal and destructive. Freud called the destructive urge *Thanatos*, which is in constant conflict with the vital and creative instinct, *Eros*. Left to themselves, without any curbs, these monsters of the unconscious can lead to dramatic violence (like the violence that bathes

in blood and litters with corpses the novels of the Marquis de Sade) and even to the extinction of the species. That is why eroticism considers prohibition not only a voluptuous stimulus but also a boundary that can lead to suffering and death when transgressed. Georges Bataille was not wrong when he warned against excessive permissiveness in sexual matters. The disappearance of prejudice—which is doubtless liberating—must not mean the abolition of the rituals, mysteries, forms, and discretion through which sex became civilized and human.

It was around 1955 when I discovered that eroticism was inseparably bound up with both human freedom and violence. I had just gotten married for the first time, and I had to take on many jobs—I ended up with eight of them—to earn a living while I continued my university studies. The most enjoyable was as an assistant to the librarian of Lima's Club Nacional, which was the

symbol of the Peruvian oligarchy. The librarian was my university teacher, the historian Raúl Porras Barrenechea. My duties consisted of spending two hours daily, from Monday to Friday, in the elegant building of the club, which was celebrating its centenary around that time. In theory, I was supposed to be cataloguing new additions to the library, but—whether because of simple negligence or a lack of funds, I don't know—the Club Nacional hardly acquired any new books in those years, so I could spend my two hours writing and reading. These were the happiest hours of days during which I otherwise never stopped doing things that interested me little or not at all. I did not work in the beautiful reading room on the ground floor of the club; I was in an office on the fourth floor. There I discovered, with delight, hidden behind discreet folding screens and prim little curtains, *Les Maîtres de l'amour*, a splendid collection of erotic books, almost all French, compiled by Guillaume Apollinaire (who wrote prologues to and translated some of the volumes). I read the letters and sexual fantasies of Diderot, Mirabeau, Sade, Restif de la Bretonne, Andréa de Nerciat, and Aretino; I read Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie*, Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and any number of other emblematic works.

Erotic literature had classical antecedents, of course, but it really came of age in eighteenth-century Europe, in the heyday of the philosophes, with their great innovative theories on morality and politics, their campaign against religious obscurantism, and their passionate defense of freedom. Philosophy, sedition, pleasure, and freedom were what these thinkers and artists demanded and practiced in their writings. They embraced with pride the use of the term "libertine" to describe themselves. Historically, the primary meaning of this word was a person who defies God in the name of liberty.

This doesn't mean that libertine literature must always be seen as a cry of freedom against all the forms of subjugation and servitude—religious, moral, political—that restrict the right to free will, to social and political freedom, and to pleasure. In fact, the great merit of the monotonous novels of the Marquis de Sade is to show how sex, if practiced without any limits, leads to deranged violence because it is the main channel through which the most destructive instincts of personality are manifest. Books that concentrate in an obsessive and exclusive manner on the description of sexual experiences soon succumb to repetition and monomania. When separated from the other activities and functions that make up the lives of men and women, sexual activity loses vitality and becomes a limited, inauthentic depiction of the human condition.

An ideal eroticism would broaden the boundaries within which our sex lives unfold such that men

and women might act freely, exploring their desires and fantasies without feeling threatened or discriminated against. But it would still maintain the forms that preserve the private and intimate nature of sex, so that sex lives do not become banal or animalistic. With its rituals and fantasies, its clandestine nature, its love of form and theatricality, eroticism emerges as a product of high civilization, a phenomenon inconceivable in primitive or rudimentary societies, because it requires a refined sensibility, a literary and artistic culture, and a certain propensity for transgression. "Transgression" has to be taken with a pinch of salt here, since, within the context of eroticism, it does not mean a denial of the dominant moral or religious code but rather the simultaneous recognition and rejection of that code. Violating the norm in an intimate setting, with discretion and through mutual accord, the couple or the group performs a theatrical game that inflames pleasure while also maintaining the confidential and secret nature of sex itself.

Without attention to the forms and rituals that enrich, prolong, and sublimate pleasure, the sex act would again become a purely physical exercise—a natural drive in the human organism, devoid of sensitivity and emotion. A good illustration of this today can be found in the trashy literature that purports to be erotic but achieves only the vulgar rudiments of the genre—pornography. Erotic literature becomes pornographic for purely literary reasons: a sloppy use of form. When writers are negligent or clumsy in their use of language, their plot construction, their use of dialogue, their description of a scene, they inadvertently reveal everything that is crude and repulsive in a sexual coupling devoid of feeling and elegance—one that lacks a *mise-en-scène*—which becomes the mere satisfaction of the reproductive instinct.

Making love in our time, in the Western world, is much closer to pornography than to eroticism. The masturbation workshops that young people will attend in the future as part of their school curriculum might appear to be a daring step forward in the struggle against priggishness and prejudice. In reality it is likely that this and other initiatives designed to demystify sex—revealing it as something as commonplace as eating, sleeping, and going to work—will prematurely disillusion future generations. Without mystery, passion, fantasy, and creativity, sex becomes a banal gymnastic workout.

If we want physical love to enrich people's lives, let us free it from prejudice but not from the rites that embellish and civilize it. Instead of exhibiting it in broad daylight, let us preserve the privacy and discretion that allow lovers to play at being gods, to feel that they are gods, in those intense and unique instances of shared passion and desire.

[Saga]

## THE ACT OF ART

*From a March 1961 letter sent by Charles Bukowski to Jon Webb, the editor of The Outsider and an early champion of Bukowski's work. Bukowski (1920–94) was the author of six novels and several poetry and short-story collections. On Writing, a collection of his letters, is out next month from Ecco.*

**D**ear Jon:

The only way to get away from the mob is to move and rent a p. o. box, and don't ever tell one where you're at because one will tell the other and then they are at your door again wanting to TALK ... about what? WHAT IS THERE TO SAY? If we were practicing public speaking or running A HOME FOR THE LONELY HEARTS or running for office it would be different.

I had this one poet on my neck for a long time. He'd come to town without a car and I'd drive him around to all the places he wanted to go—not all of them, for christ sake, but enough. "Ya wanna meet James Boyer May?" he'd ask me. "Hell no," I'd say.

"I saw Curtis Zahn and he looked at me through his beard when I mentioned I knew you ... 'Bukowski!' he said, 'Where is that son of a bitch? Nobody's ever seen him!'"

And if this fucker had had his way he would have dragged me in front of all of them. And he used my phone to telephone every editor in town, starting the thing off with—"I'm so and so, and I'm over at Charles Bukowski's place, I just got into town with so and so, the editor of X, and blah blah blah..."

And then turning to me—FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, DON'T YOU EVER USE THIS PHONE? IT'S COVERED WITH DUST!

I use it now and then to dial the time.

But what bothers me is when I read about the old Paris groups, or somebody who knew somebody in the old days. They did it then too, the names of old and now. I think Hemingway's writing a book about it now. But in spite of it all, I can't buy it. I can't stand writers or editors or anybody who wants to talk Art. For 3 years I lived in a skid-row hotel—before my hemorrhage—and got drunk every night with an x-con, the hotel maid, an Indian, a gal who looked like she wore a wig but didn't, and 3 or 4 drifters. Nobody knew Shostakovich from Shelley Winters and we didn't give a damn. The main thing was sending runners out for liquor when we ran dry. We'd start low on the line with our worst runner and if he failed—you must understand, most of the time there was little or no money—we'd go a little deeper with our next best man. I guess it's bragging but I was top dog. And when the last one staggered through the door, pale and

shamed, Bukowski would rise with an invective, don his ragged cloak and stroll with anger and assurance into the night, down to Dick's Liquor

[Breaches]

## OVERHEAD COMPORTMENT

*From newspaper accounts since 2010 of incidents in which airplane passengers were removed or flights were rerouted in response to passenger behavior. Compiled by Shayla Love and Winston Choi-Schagrin.*

An elderly man on a delayed Hong Kong Airlines flight struck a stewardess several times as passengers clapped and cheered.

A woman on a Thai AirAsia flight threw hot water and instant noodles at a flight attendant after being told that she couldn't be seated with her friends. Her companion yelled that he would "bomb the plane."

Moments after a Jet Airways flight landed, a passenger opened the emergency exit, jumped to the ground, and walked away.

A Southwest passenger stabbed her snoring neighbor with a pen.

A woman on a British Airways flight from Kingston, Jamaica, to London removed her clothing and began to masturbate.

A Sunwing plane bound for Cuba turned around after two female passengers consumed their duty-free alcohol, smoked cigarettes in the lavatory, and began to physically fight each other.

A passenger on a US Airways flight brought spoiled meat in his carry-on bag. The contents spilled as the flight taxied, causing maggots to fall from the overhead bin onto the heads of travelers below.

During an EasyJet flight from Tel Aviv to London, a passenger took a two-foot-long snake from his luggage and began feeding it.

A man flicked a scorpion that fell on him during an Alaskan Airlines flight onto a woman sitting next to him. The scorpion stung her.

A Middle East Airlines plane turned around mid-flight to retrieve an Iraqi parliament member's son, who had missed the flight.

An American Airlines plane made an emergency landing after a passenger refused to stop singing "I Will Always Love You."



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MACCARONE, NEW YORK CITY

*All Souls' Eve*, a painting by Cecily Brown, whose work was on view last month at Maccarone, in New York City. Her book with Jim Lewis, *The English Garden*, was published in May.

Store, and I conned him and forced him and squeezed him until he was dizzy; I would walk in in big anger, not beggary, and ask for what I wanted. Dick never knew whether I had any money or not. Sometimes I fooled him and had money. But most of the time I didn't. But anyhow, he'd slap the bottles in front of me, bag them, and then I'd pick them up with an angry, "Put 'em on my tab!"

And then he'd start the old dance—but, *jesus*, u owe me such and such already, and you haven't paid anything off in a month and—

And then came the ACT OF ART. I already had the bottles in my hand. It would be nothing to walk out. But I'd slap them down again in front of him, ripping them out of the bag and shoving them toward him, saying, "Here, you *want* these things! I'll take my goddamned business somewhere else!"

"No, no," he'd say, "take them. It's all right."

And then he'd get out that sad slip of paper and add on to the total.

"Lemme see that," I'd demand.

And then I'd say, "For Christ's sake! I don't owe you *this* much! What's this item here?"

All this was to make him believe that I was going to pay someday. And then he'd try to con me back: "You're a gentleman. You're not like the others. I trust you."

He finally got sick and sold his business, and when the next one came in I started a new tab . . .

And what happened? At eight o'clock one Sunday morning—EIGHT O'CLOCK!!! *gd damn* it—there was a knock at the door—and I opened it and there stood an editor. "Ah, I'm so and so, editor of so and so, we got your short story and thought it most unusual; we are going to use it in our Spring number." "Well, come on in," I'd had to say, "but don't stumble over the bottles." And then I sat there while he told me about his wife who thought a lot of him and about his short story that had once been published in *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, and you know how they talk on. He finally left, and a month or so later the hall phone rang and somebody wanted Bukowski, and this

time it was a woman's voice, "Mr. Bukowski, we think you have a very unusual short story and the group was discussing it the other night, but we think it has one weakness and we thought you might want to correct the weakness. It was this: WHY DID THE CENTRAL CHARACTER BEGIN TO DRINK IN THE FIRST PLACE?"

I said, "Forget the whole thing and send the story back," and I hung up.

When I walked back in the Indian looked up over his drink and asked, "Who was it?"

I said, "Nobody," which was the most accurate answer I could give.

[Precedents]

## BLEAKNESS STAKES

*From summaries of police-brutality cases recently settled by the city of Baltimore. An investigation conducted last year by the Baltimore Sun found that police-misconduct settlements have cost the city nearly \$6 million since 2011. Compiled by Ryann Liebenthal and Shayla Love.*

Venus Green, an eighty-seven-year-old woman, telephoned for an ambulance after she heard her grandson yell from down the street that he had been shot. When police arrived, they accused her and her grandson of lying about the circumstances and location of the shooting. One officer dragged Green along her living-room floor, pressed his knee into her back, twisted her arms, handcuffed her, and threw her facedown onto her couch. "Bitch," he said, "you are no better than any of the other old black bitches that I have locked up." An hour later, another officer came in and saw the plaintiff bent over and crying. He turned to the officers who had cuffed her. "Can't you see that Ms. Green is an old lady?" Settlement: \$95,370

During a traffic stop of seventy-seven-year-old James "Lenny" Clay, who was suspected of driving while intoxicated and hitting a parked car, Baltimore police officers slammed him to the ground, fracturing his arm, breaking his eyeglasses, and cracking his dentures. Settlement: \$63,000

Lornell Felder, a sixty-two-year-old man, was standing in front of his house near midnight. When he began rolling a cigarette, two men dressed in jeans and sweats jumped from an unmarked SUV and ran toward him. Felder fled toward his house, but the men grabbed him. Felder punched one of them and yelled to his wife

to call the police. She shouted into the phone, "I need the police. Some guys are beating up my husband." Felder screamed three more times, begging someone to call the police. One of the assailants said, "We are the police." The men continued to beat Felder, whom they suspected of marijuana possession. Settlement: \$100,000

Daudi Collier was walking down the street when a squad car pulled up to him. Police officers in the car alleged that he was walking with a clenched fist, suggesting possession of contraband, in a high-crime area. Collier claimed that one of the officers pushed a door of the car into him. Collier began to run. The officers gave chase and beat him with their walkie-talkies. Settlement: \$175,000

Starr Brown, a pregnant twenty-six-year-old, was entering her house with her three-year-old when she saw a group of girls attack two other girls walking down the block. The police arrived, and most of the girls fled. In the course of questioning the victims, the police began to yell. Brown interceded and explained that the two girls had been attacked. The officers told Brown to mind her own business. They pulled her from the entryway of her house and pushed her to the ground. One officer placed his knee on her back. She was arrested and charged with hindering an investigation, resisting arrest, second-degree assault, and disorderly conduct. Brown's child, who witnessed the arrest, was left home alone during her detention. All of the charges were eventually dropped. Settlement: \$125,000

Jonathan Hunt, a fifty-three-year-old mechanic, was walking on the sidewalk. Without warning, seven unidentified police officers attacked Hunt from behind. He was hospitalized and treated for a broken leg, broken collarbone, three cracked ribs, facial lacerations, and contusions. Hunt was never taken to central booking, nor was a statement of probable cause provided to him. He now walks with a cane. Settlement: \$60,000

After Lillian Parker finished her duties as a cafeteria worker at a public elementary school, she went to her church to decorate for a weekend prayer breakfast. Later, she stopped near a restaurant, where a friend planned to meet her to pick up tickets for the event. A Baltimore police officer approached Parker. She was ordered to sit on the street, handcuffed, and arrested on suspicion of narcotics violations. She was held for more than two days in central booking before her case was dismissed. Settlement: \$100,000

Jerriel Lyles entered P&J Carry Out. According to Lyles, David Greene, a plainclothes Baltimore police officer, assaulted him, breaking his nose and injuring his left eye, before departing with

[Memo]

## AND RED ALL OVER

*From the FBI file on Lloyd Louis Brown, who wrote the prison novel Iron City (1951), edited several Communist journals, and coauthored Paul Robeson's autobiography, Here I Stand. The file was acquired by William Maxwell, whose book F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature was published by Princeton University Press in February. Maxwell recovered FBI files kept on fifty-one twentieth-century African-American writers.*

**O**n 2/20/62 in the vicinity of 43rd St. and Broadway, Lloyd Brown was approached by S.A.'s [redacted] and [redacted] for the purpose of conducting an interview. When approached, Brown acknowledged his identity, whereupon the Agents suggested that he pause momentarily to discuss certain matters of apparent interest. Brown, in an excited and vehement manner, stated that he was only interested in his freedom and that he was not going to discuss anything with the FBI until he got his freedom. Continuing, he stated that the FBI should be down South investigating the deplorable conditions under which the Negroes must live. When pressed for a specific situation wherein the Bureau would have jurisdiction, Brown continued a tirade concerning his freedom. When it was mentioned to Brown that he could hardly deny that great strides had been made in the Negro question, and that since he apparently did not think so, it should then follow that his activity in the Communist movement was ineffective, and therefore, perhaps the interviewing Agents could suggest a new approach to him, Brown ignored this and stated, "I'm just a Mau Mau without a spear. Go ahead, call me a 'nigger,' everybody else does." Brown continued by advising the Agents to go back and tell whoever they tell that he is the meanest, rottenest S.O.B. they ever met and that is the way he is going to be until he gets his freedom.

Further efforts were made to bring Brown around to discussing himself and the Communist conspiracy, and to neutralize by reason his apparent obsession with [his] lack of freedom. Brown ignored these efforts and continued ranting in an irrational manner. The interview was thus terminated. In view of Brown's hostile attitude coupled with his expressed obsession with Negro inequality, no recontact is contemplated at this time.

two other officers. None of the men identified themselves as police. Later, officers claimed that Lyles became hostile after they requested his driver's license. They also alleged that Lyles had replied to Greene's question about what had caused a "trickle of blood" near his left eye by saying "I poked myself in the eye." Settlement: \$200,000

[Reminiscence]

## TWO EXILES

*By Frederic Morton, from a speech given at the Vienna Haus der Barmherzigkeit two days before he died, in April. Morton was a critic, an essayist, and the author of several novels. His essay "The Seductive Catastrophe" was published in the August 2014 issue of Harper's Magazine. Translated from the German by Nicholas Nardini.*

**M**y first exile was leaving my geographic homeland. I grew up in Hernals right near the border of Ottakring, on Thelemanngasse. I wrote a novel about this tiny alley called *The Forever Street*—in German, *Ewigkeitsgasse*. It wasn't easy. When I tapped "Shut up, you idiot!" on my typewriter, it didn't have nearly the force or the spice of "*Halt die Goschen, Depperter!*"

And yet somehow I brought it into existence, probably the only novel ever written that takes place exclusively in the Viennese suburbs but is written in English sentences. The word "but" is ambiguous here. It expresses the homesickness of a man uprooted from his fatherland, from his mother tongue, and from his native dialect—and it hides in this pain the particular benefits I gained, as an aspiring American writer, from my uprooting. Banished into exile, working in a foreign language, how did I still succeed in earning a living? What mattered was not only talent but also a paradox of my profession. Sartre said in his autobiography: "The writer speaks in his native tongue, but writes in a foreign language." The moment a scribbler sits at his desk, the language he must use becomes entirely different from his everyday language. It is a difficult challenge.

An example: in so-called real life, if a writer gets hungry, he goes into the grocery store and says, "Good day. A sausage roll with ten decagrams of Krakauer, please." He speaks his wish completely naturally. It is otherwise with the writer's fictional characters. If a character's stomach growls and he communicates his desire for a sausage to the shop clerk, then the wording and tone of this wish must express his personality and mood, and at the same

time serve the plot development and also the ambience, the milieu, and the rhythm of the narrative. His request for sausage must be spoken in a poetically composed artificial language, which must nevertheless not appear contrived.

As a fifteen-year-old I was thrown from Thelemannngasse onto Broadway, but I was still, in America, addicted to sausage rolls. So I went to the supermarket and said, "Good day. A sausage roll, please, with ten decagrams of Krakauer." And I learned very soon that in New York one does not have time to say "good day," and that in America neither "Krakauer" nor decagrams are known.

So much for my first exile. The second came later. It was the banishment from youth into age. For youth is our biological and physiological homeland. There, we know our way. And even if in our nostalgic memories the sun shines where it was actually dark, still we are familiar with the pitfalls and perils of youth. We know how to live in that homeland with good and bad—how to master it, anyway, better than we know how to navigate the foreign country of age into which we are expelled.

At first we try to ignore the expulsion altogether. In my case that didn't seem so hard, since my second exile was neither as sudden nor as dramatic as the first. My second emigration crept in, so to speak, on tiptoe. I was too busy to perceive it. And then I had to learn all at once that I was irrevocably, indisputably, undeniably, and obviously no longer nineteen but ninety.

Suddenly, I've fallen hard and deep into the land of the old. It is harder to navigate than the America of my first exile. As a purely physical matter, it is totally different from the land of the young. The distance between two points is greater. When I go from my Upper West Side apartment to a supermarket to buy the New York equivalent of a sausage roll, the way is much longer and more troublesome than it was. The streets are permanently slippery; you slide easily and so must, as a precaution, use a cane. The stairs are much steeper. Even on a leisurely stroll you can lose your breath, because the air in this country is very thin—thinner than on the Grossglockner summit.

The people I meet in this foreign country are mostly outrageously young, really annoyingly young. They are rarely as kind as youth in my time were. They are impatient, rage-driven, egoistic, and appear to be happier with their electronic devices than with other people.

Yet there is a certain parallel between my first and my second exiles. Both have, in the midst of their darknesses, certain points of light. The impetuous young inhabitants of the second exile are in fact often patient and considerate when confronted with the awkwardness of us old ones. They make sure that we, even at ninety, can enjoy such pleasures as a sausage roll with ten decagrams of Krakauer.

[Fiction]

## A LITTLE BOTTLE OF TEARS

By Diane Williams, from *FINE, FINE, FINE, FINE, FINE*, a story collection out next year from McSweeney's. Williams's story "Living Deluxe" appeared in the June 2013 issue of Harper's Magazine.

**I**t should have been nicer—our friendships, our travel, our romances secretly lived—if we weren't so old. But still it was an interesting situation to be in.

[Shopping List]

## WHEN IN CHROME

From an experiment conducted by Fixr.com, a cost-estimating website. The experiment collected the top search queries suggested by Google for the phrase "How much does \* cost in [country]."

How much does a beer cost in Estonia?  
 How much does a watermelon cost in Japan?  
 How much does a Big Mac cost in Serbia?  
 How much does a BMW cost in Germany?  
 How much does bread cost in Mozambique?  
 How much does building a house cost in Cameroon?  
 How much does a safari cost in Botswana?  
 How much does a diamond cost in Sierra Leone?  
 How much does an iPhone cost in China?  
 How much does a maid cost in Singapore?  
 How much does a prostitute cost in Hungary?  
 How much does a nose job cost in Albania?  
 How much does a tummy tuck cost in Mexico?  
 How much does a vasectomy cost in New Zealand?  
 How much does a patent cost in the United States?  
 How much does it cost to fly a MiG in Russia?  
 How much does it cost to moor a yacht in Monaco?  
 How much does it cost to retire in Nicaragua?  
 How much does a panama hat cost in Ecuador?  
 How much does a cow cost in South Sudan?  
 How much does a camel cost in Egypt?  
 How much does a camel cost in Israel?  
 How much does a kidney cost in Iran?  
 How much does a divorce cost in Trinidad and Tobago?  
 How much does a funeral cost in Haiti?

We all but ignored the wife's tears—which could have filled a small bottle.

And the wife was petite and well groomed and I knew why she was crying. She thought her trials were all about adultery at that time.

As the evening proceeded, the wife cheered up for some of it and her conversation was drawing us in with topics she knew we would feel comfortable talking about, because potentially our relationship could be adversarial and her husband was tending to pontificate, showing off his legal wings with paragraphs upon paragraphs.

You find yourself in a situation where you have agreed, agreed, agreed, agreed, and you realize this is not such a good agreement.

How did all this end? Oh, fine, fine, fine, fine, fine—although our process of digestion—they'd served us *Kartoffelpuffer* and *Sauerbraten*—was not yet complete—when the husband said finally about his wife, "Bettie's tired."

To my mind—she's hysterical, sincere, easily distracted, and not adaptable. I remember when I wanted to know even more about her.

They lived only on the ground floor—the rest was rented out. A trestle table, where you could put your gloves, stood in the long hall that had stone floor tiles set on the diagonal.

Bettie's thumbs were as I remembered—heavy and clubbed—and she wore the eye-catching turquoise ring, circa 1890, with three pearls, that I knew she was proud of because I had given it to her.

"Bettie's tired," the husband repeated.

"I am tired," Bettie said.

And there was no polite way for him to tell us, "Fuck off now."

There'd be no more condescending talk, no fresh subjects, never likely an opportunity to privately reminisce with Bettie about the times when we were side by side, experiencing that alternating rhythm forward and back.

"Can we give you a lift home?"

"No, that's not necessary, we drove," we said.

I went into their bathroom to urinate before we left. I am a man, if that wasn't clear before this, and not a drunken one, not cruel—and I was holding myself then, gently, somewhat lovingly, to relieve myself.

I washed my hands and face and looked into the mirror. My face has changed so much recently. The lines of age were drawn everywhere like the marks made by a claw, and they looked to me freshly made. Then there are those growing fleshy abutments around my jaw and under my chin.

It was rainy outside and we were significantly dampened by the time we reached our car. In addition, a smelly ailanthus tree tossed a pitcherful of storm water—as if from a sacred fount—all over my head. There were continuing showers—it was dripping, gushy.

Still it was all so charming and heartening—that is, the summer storm, and the trees, and our sky, alongside those several memories of Bettie and me.

My wife said to me en route, "Well, I suppose I'm on the wrong track, too."

Of course, it took a long time for her to go downhill, all the way down it.

Meanwhile, we became very friendly with the DePauls—Clifford and Daisy.

They lived in an apartment crammed with blue-and-white china, for one thing. I thought Daisy usually looked pensive and sad and my wife thought that her scowl meant that she detested us.

A large oil painting of a female nude—hands together as if prayerful—had been suspended over their mantel. Their apartment was in disarray.

But there's always a moment before it all becomes okay.

[Fiction]

## NICE INSANE

By Seth Price, from his novel *Fuck Seth Price*, out last month from Leopard Press. Price's earlier novel, *How to Disappear in America*, was published in 2008.

He drifted through a thick and obscure world, observant but incapable of action. It took him a while to understand that he wasn't dreaming but moving through the real world and actual life, only it was no longer his life, because his body and all its doings were no longer under his control. He found himself carrying out strange and horrible acts: murder and abduction, most disturbingly, but also other furtive activities that he couldn't make sense of. Through all of this he was able only to watch, resigned to imprisonment in his physical machinery, his mind turning over slowly like an idle hard disk. This certainly afforded him plenty of time to figure out exactly where things had gone wrong, and he came to blame his obsession with "keeping up"—with technology, with the young, with the culture—a pursuit that had replaced even artistic production as his chief occupation, filling the vacuum that opened up when he more or less stopped making art.

It was easy to locate the moment of inspiration that had rejuvenated his painting career, making him rich but ultimately leading him to reject contemporary art. One day in the early 2000s, he'd been sitting in a new Italian restaurant, considering his supper. For decades now, he remarked to

himself as he regarded a bowl of grated pecorino, Americans had possessed a sure idea of what Italian food was: what it tasted like, what it looked like, what it *meant*. For his parents' generation, and even during his own childhood, Italian food meant Italian-American food, an immigrant form, once alien but now ubiquitous, a way of putting dinner on the table, hardly a cuisine. Then the Eighties happened, and everyone discovered real Italian food, food from Italy that was defiantly not Italian-American food, which consequently entered a kind of limbo. Spaghetti and meatballs: yes, everyone still liked it and cooked it, it still had its place, but that place was not a trendy restaurant.

Recently, however, which is to say in the early 2000s, shortly before he had his revelation, some notable chef had realized that spaghetti and meatballs was what people had wanted all along, and why shouldn't they have it? This chef understood that you could give diners what they wanted without abandoning culinary invention and the associated high prices. What you did was trundle out lowbrow recipes and thematize them, burnishing them for a new audience too young to remember why the recipes had been discarded in the first place. To use a mid-Nineties term, the old recipes were upcycled.

It was a runaway success. Customers were excited and relieved to plunge into the frisson of the old/new, and restaurants all over the city, and then internationally, adopted the formula. Soon came high-end tweakings of meat loaf, mac and cheese, donuts, PB&J sandwiches, chicken wings, and even Twinkies: all cherished comfort foods that no one had previously thought to rework as pricey lifestyle fare. It must have been the times, he mused, because something similar had happened in the movie industry, which overwhelmingly pursued remakes of films that were best forgotten, the crappier the better. We live in an era of expensive fetish food, he thought, but it's also an era in which poor, uneducated parents name their babies DeJohn because it sounds pungent yet sophisticated, unaware that these associations originated in a series of Eighties television commercials for a style of mustard. But all this stuff—high and low, classic and contemporary, good and bad—was muddled and slippery, and everyone was equally clueless. When Grey Poupon actually rolled out a line called DeJawn's, no one wanted it, not because it was marketed as "Da Street Mustard" but because it was widely considered too Eighties.

As he sat there devouring his *bucatini con le polpette*, he somehow made an associative leap and found himself wondering whether abstract painting wasn't due for a spaghetti-and-meatballs recuperation. After all, it had enjoyed a history similar to that of Italian-American

cuisine. Both had appeared early in the twentieth century and were widely received with suspicion and derision (all that garlic!); both enjoyed, at midcentury, an early-adopter hipster appreciation that inevitably subsided, though not before preparing the ground for a broader mass appeal, which precipitated a fall from grace in the perception of elites. Artists continued to make abstract paintings in large numbers, but, as with cooks of spaghetti and meatballs, they were amateur or otherwise removed from the real conversation, not cutting-edge professionals in sophisticated contexts.

Someone, he realized, needed to come along and devise a painterly abstraction that embodied cultural sophistication and "nowness." It had to look classically tasteful and refer to well-known historical byways, but it also had to be undergirded by utter contemporaneity, either of sensibility or of production method. Upcycling was evolving as an idea and was perhaps itself being upcycled: in the early Nineties it had promised to help the developing world redeem its waste, at the turn of the century it grew to encompass the food consumption of a smaller set of First Worlders with extra time and money, and now it would take on fine art, an even more rarefied realm of cultural production available to only the wealthy few. But he knew this was the way of all culture, all trends: a continuous flow from top to bottom and back again, as in a trick fountain.

He went directly home after dinner and drew up a list of working methods and materials, which he would dutifully follow in the months to come. His new painting would be abstract, he decided; there was a broader audience for the style since it matched every décor and lacked uncomfortable associations with real people, events, and political situations. Abstraction in and of itself was uninteresting, of course; the all-important twist here, the redeeming feature, would be the way in which this work was generated, which would expand in importance, endowing the abstraction with meaning. Here there was quite a bit of latitude. Most obviously the painting could be based on chance, which obliterated traditional notions of composition and looked kind of punk: accidental stains on canvas, for example; maybe the oil-pan drippings of a Foxconn machine as it produced iPhones. But then he wondered, did machines drip anymore? Did anything run on oil? Wasn't everything becoming electric? Maybe this avenue was far-fetched. Perhaps the work might play with the medium's material conventions, a "painting" that was in fact composed of vacuum-formed polystyrene: stretcher bars, canvas, markings, and all. Or it might be apparently abstract but actually full of charged referents that became clear only when you inspected the list of materials, e.g., "Coca-Cola spills on Nigerian mud cloth." Or it might be computer generated, e.g., it might consist of

[Poem]

## ASPHODEL

By Elizabeth Willis, from a work in progress. *New York Review Books* published Willis's sixth collection, *Alive*, in April. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2012.

Start with  
an ordinary president

his sweater, his door

Can't we just fail  
different

driving a leaf

through un-  
resistant corn

Punch, Judy

Without the comma  
it's a command

"Come hither"

Like a cartoon  
the bombing begins

in the middle

of banned  
books week

Its pillow talk  
can be reversed

but not rewound

A myth  
is not a romance

Out back  
it's an appointment

Asphodel at 3

You have to name it  
You have to take it

to hell with you

Photoshop manipulations printed on canvas. Or you could hit all four possibilities at once: "Foxconn worker's accidental Coke spills on Nigerian mud cloth, scanned and randomly manipulated in Photoshop, printed on Belgian linen stretched over a vacuum-formed frame."

In truth, the production method hardly mattered, because whichever he chose, the results would look more or less the same: tepid compositions, hesitant and minimal in appearance, kind of pretty and kind of whatever, loaded with backstory. The main thing to remember, both in executing this work and in appreciating it on the wall, was to be *knowing*, just like the chefs who composed fancy renditions of red-sauce dishes, and the diners who paid top dollar, and the critics who wrote breezy acknowledgments.

The problem this solved was the persistent problem of taste in painting. In no arena of art-making did taste intrude so assertively and persistently as it did in the practice of painting. In installation art or conceptual art it was difficult to discern or comfortably judge the merits of a work without anxiety, but in painting the problem of taste was always right on the surface, in the frame, so to speak. It was okay to point at a painting and assert "That's good" or "That's bad" without feeling like a complete idiot. You couldn't pull that off as easily when faced with a scrappy installation or a conceptual work composed of puns and feints. The problem was, while these artworks got to hover in the grace of doubt and inscrutability, there were far too many observers who were absolutely certain about their judgments as to what constituted good and bad painting, and the history of painting was therefore racked by cyclical surges of interest one way or another, now veering toward "bad" painting that indulged in tastelessness by way of excess, vulgarity, or prurience, now tacking back toward a more graphic, minimal style. Because fashions changed rapidly, a single painting might in twenty years traverse the spectrum of perceived value and then whip back again, and this variability made everyone nervous.

The new style he'd hit on, however, managed to finesse the taste problem by recourse to the old philosophical trick of playing *being* against *seeming*. In preparing the work, any number of methods or styles would do, so long as the result looked "cool," which ensured that the painting would appear classic and minimal while emanating a vague awareness of rich historical struggle. To an observer it would *seem* tasteful, but in its apparent lack of concern for traditional skill or labor, its arguably cynical irreverence toward sincerity or depth, its dismissal of history, and its punk attitude, it would *be* tasteless.

Or *perhaps it was the other way around*? One couldn't really say, or rather one could, but only with a nagging feeling of insecurity. This insta-



Photographs of frozen waterfalls from *Gravity*, a series by Hayato Wakabayashi, whose work was on view in May at IMA Gallery, in Tokyo.

bility was catnip to critics and journalists, and they wrote a lot about this new painting, bickering and bemoaning and celebrating. Collectors were thankful for those gusts of language in their sails as they blew through the auctions. Young artists and students were relieved to get back to doing what they'd secretly wanted to do all along, under the powerful sign of a new contemporaneity. In short, the entire art system latched on to this revived style, much as restaurant-goers had fallen for the re-enchantment of chicken wings.

The style that gradually developed could be called *post-problem art*. It bore a clear if unacknowledged debt to the wonderful ad slogans of the period, like Staples's "That Was Easy" and Amazon's "... And You're Done." *Done!* An amazing word. Go ahead, have done with all the anguished historical debates over meaning and criticality and politics and taste. For better or for worse, everyone was in agreement that the market was the only indicator that mattered now. This climate, in which artworks would certainly sell, and the fact of selling was sufficient verification of their quality, made it officially okay simply to like a painting. It was no longer necessary to deem a piece interesting, provocative, weird, or complex,

and it was almost incomprehensible to hate something because you liked it, or like it because it unsettled you, or any of the other ambivalent and twisted ways that people wrestled with the intersection of feelings and aesthetics. You almost didn't need words anymore: it was enough to say, "That painting is *awesome*," just as you'd say, "This spaghetti is *awesome*." Alternately you could use one of the other all-purpose terms of the era, like "nice," "crazy," "perfect," and "insane." This was a radical development, one that forwent any more complicated relationship with art; it was a tremendous ironing-out process. Before you knew it, you'd spy a Malevich and declare, "That guy's a total badass." Or was it Marinetti who was the badass?

These new artworks aroused accusations of cynicism, and he admitted that he was inviting that conversation. But what was cynicism? He defined cynicism as proceeding in a way that you knew to be harmful or morally bankrupt, for reasons of greed or cowardice. The question was, what if you found such compromised behavior complex and compelling? What if you believed that exploring the world of perceived or actual cynicism was a powerful way to understand our contemporary moment? What if you *believed in not believing*? Executives or world

leaders entertaining this question would rightly be classified as sociopaths, but in the world of art these questions were okay, because suffering wasn't directly involved and any apparent cynicism was likely to be banal and venal, e.g., cashing in by provoking your audience with facile or puerile gestures. He didn't feel that his work belonged in this category. If his paintings were provocative, it was because they drew out acute and omnipresent cultural toxins: anxieties about cynicism and selling out, feelings that had everything to do with how fucked-up it was to live under neoliberal free-market capitalism. He found this exhilarating; he *believed* in it. And this tangle of contradictions was the greatest thing about art: it always meant the opposite of what you thought it meant, or wanted it to mean. Abstract versus representational, old versus new, pure versus corrupt, tasteful versus tasteless: all artistic values and categories were inherently unstable and might suddenly swap places.

Recalling his breakthrough into digital artmaking a decade earlier, he suspected that the moment he'd grasped the fact that digital art's genius was to reconcile all opposites was the start of his disenchantment with contemporary art, and with the digital condition more generally, which was predicated on reconciliation, leveling, and synthesis. Representational painting was just as banal and outmoded as its old foe abstraction, so why was it interesting to gesture at both of them at once? Who gave a shit? From the point of view of the machine he'd set in motion, all these oppositions of taste and style were merely marketing factors to be co-opted, the way Whole Foods might absorb a pair of rival local grocers only to preserve them as themed deli counters so as to snare all their old clientele.

Either/or was irrelevant, save as a gimmick to capture market share.

**I**t was not a coincidence that his disenchantment with visual art occurred right around the time when making simplistic, often digitally formulated abstract paintings became suddenly passé, as was discussing them, critiquing them, even satirizing them. These paintings amounted to societal self-portraiture, and an age grows tired of its own face. Casting about for something to do, he found himself newly interested in writing, which, in comparison to art, offered delightfully fresh challenges. He recognized the peculiarity of this step: advanced painting since the Impressionists had jettisoned the aim of re-creating a recognizable, narrativized human world and had plunged into abstraction, whereas writing had remained in thrall to narrative and human psychology. Yes, there had been a modernist rupture, but the majority of serious literary fiction, and all mass product, went right on pursuing realistic concerns. The field of contemporary art

was activated by cataclysm and relentless progress, whereas contemporary literature remained relatively staid. This was because it was a mass form, he reasoned. Who follows contemporary painting? The few. Who reads contemporary books? Everyone.

At this moment, however, he believed writing culture to be undergoing a tectonic shift. No doubt this development was late in coming, trailing by a century visual art's own decisive mutations, but then again, for all that radical change, where was art now? Wallowing in hush money, patting itself on the back for having finally solved the evolutionary problem of how to be simultaneously good and bad, abstract and representational, popular and cutting edge, with the result that nothing was at stake but auction prices.

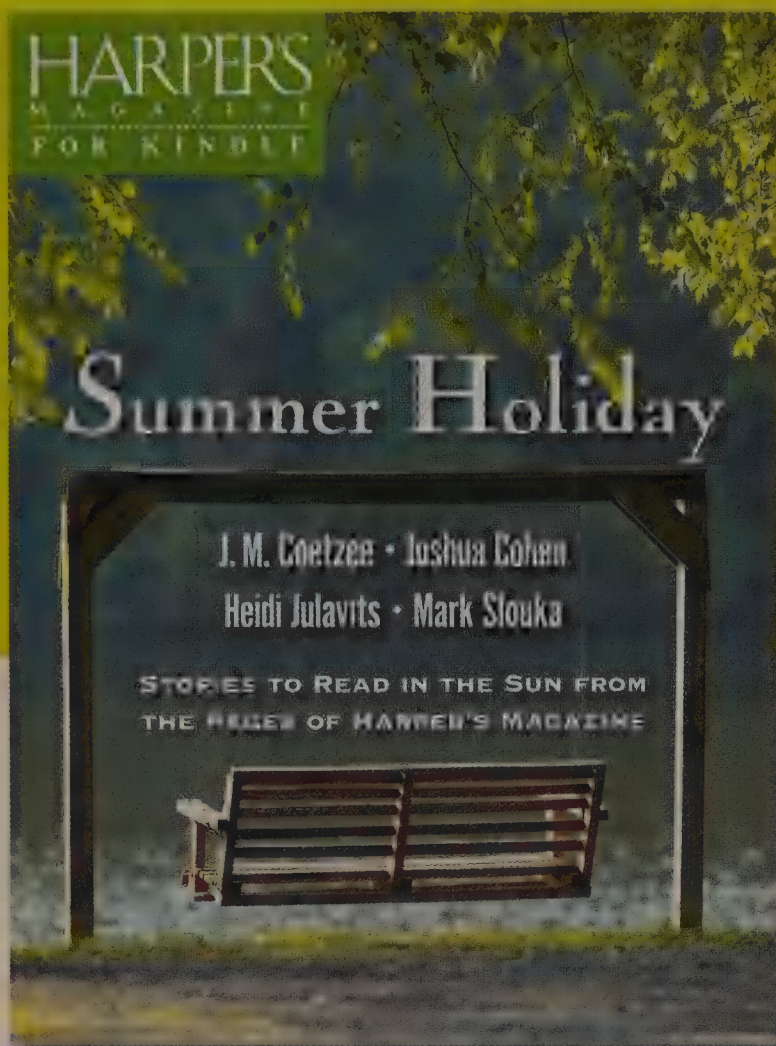
Writing, on the other hand, which had little connection to money and power, was only broadening its already considerable mass appeal, thanks to the proliferation of texting, tweeting, blogging, and so on, even as those same forces were emancipating writing from its long-standing narrative conventions. In fact, it was less apposite to say "Who reads? Everyone" than "Who writes? Everyone." Maybe this explained why writing was becoming at the same time more popular and more abstract. In short, writing was becoming just plain *weirder*.

In this situation, and in distinction to the problems of visual art, *everything* was at stake: "the novel," of course, but also "the field of literature," "the book business," "the future of the word," and communication itself. No one knew what it meant. You could feel the charge of that anxious energy, it was the motor thrumming behind many recent novels and columns and articles and blog posts. He imagined this to be a historical echo of the introduction of film, with all of that medium's looming ramifications for the image, and how odd that this contemporary upset concerned words!

He himself was not a writer by any stretch. He'd tried it years ago, had even enjoyed success with some oddball critical essays that circulated in art-world contexts, but ultimately he'd dropped it. The problem with the art world was that you were *expected* to write uneven, eccentric, unresolved texts; it was like being a grad student in an experimental-writing workshop. While many in the art world were wonderfully omnivorous, broad-minded readers, few were any good at writing, including most of the critics and curators, so it was easy to stand out. Most people didn't even bother with critiques of art-world writing, and for good reason: if people criticized you for being lazy or obscurantist, you could assert that you were being "artistic," that what you'd intended was not lucid rhetoric but Delphic poesy. Writing these texts was like making films in which everything was a dream sequence, and therefore immune to charges of illogic and sloppiness. At the same time, of course, nothing was at stake.



*"Bastille Day," a photograph by Irina Rozovsky from the series Midway. Her monograph Island in My Mind was published last month.*



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# THE WORK CURE FOR WOMEN

By Lorna Jean King

This vague put-upon feeling had been bothering me for some time, but only recently did I finally realize that I'm just one victim of a vast conspiracy. Chances are that any woman who has seen a doctor—a male doctor—in the past ten years has had the same kind of experience.

It started back in 1950, when I had to go to the clinic with a badly infected finger. I always get wounded in the annual battle with the rosebushes. After the precautionary tetanus shot, I wondered what to do for the finger.

"Oh, that," the doctor said cheerfully. "Nothing better for it than hot soapy dishwater three times a day."

I was somewhat let down, since I'd been rehearsing a speech to my husband about the impossibility of my doing dishes for at least a week.

The following winter I came down with a cold that vacillated between chest and sinuses for several days. When home remedies failed, I called on a throat specialist. After the usual sprays, throat paintings, and antibiotics, he said briskly:

"You'll be fine in a few days—and remember, there's nothing better than steam for these congestions. Be sure to inhale the steam from your dishwasher, and turn the shower on full blast while you clean the bathroom."

"There's a good deal of steam involved in ironing clothes too," I said sourly.

"Fine, fine," he said, obviously encouraged by my cooperative attitude.

That evening, when my husband asked why I was banging the dishes around so viciously, I countered by inquiring why it was that when he had a cold the doctor always told him to go to bed.



Some time later I sprained my ankle. I told my husband it hurt too badly to be broken, but he insisted on rushing me to the orthopedist. Two X-rays and \$20 later, the doctor was taping me up with a professional flourish.

"I suppose I'll have to stay off my foot for a few days," I ventured.

"Not at all," he boomed. "These things heal fastest when you keep on using them."

I mentioned that when my cousin sprained his ankle they told him to stay off it for a week.

"Well, circumstances alter cases," the doctor said evasively. "I'll tell you,

though, it's a good idea to put your foot up occasionally while you are sewing."

"Thanks a lot," I muttered.

Not long after, I found evidence that doctors will apparently stop at nothing. The following is an Associated Press dispatch datelined Calgary, Canada:

To housewives who aim at top physical condition: get down and scrub the kitchen floor. This advice comes from Dr. D. Plewes, consultant for Canada's health and welfare department, who says, "Some of the best exercises for women are done on the hands and knees and utilize floor scrubbing motions."

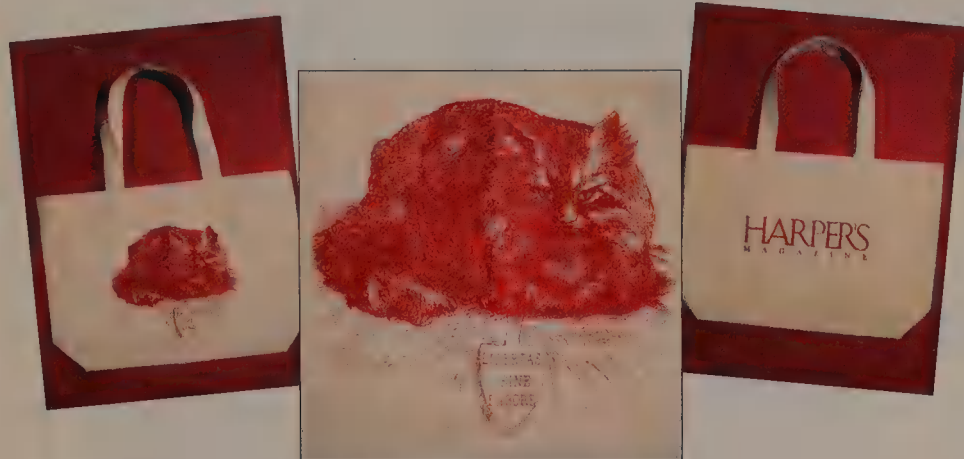
I was busy planning a counter-campaign that would persuade doctors to

prescribe lawn mowing instead of golf for middle-aged males, when I discovered I was in what used to be called "a delicate condition." My husband waited on me hand and food—until after our first visit to the obstetrician.

"Now about exercises," he said cheerfully. (Have you ever noticed how maddeningly cheerful doctors are?) "The best exercises are ones you can do while you work around the house. Bend your knees and keep your back straight when you do your dusting. Practice deep breathing while you wash dishes and—"

"—Inhale the steam," I said absently. ■

"The Work Cure for Women" appeared in the April 1958 issue of Harper's Magazine. The essay—along with the magazine's entire 165-year archive—is available online at [harpers.org/fromthearchive](http://harpers.org/fromthearchive).



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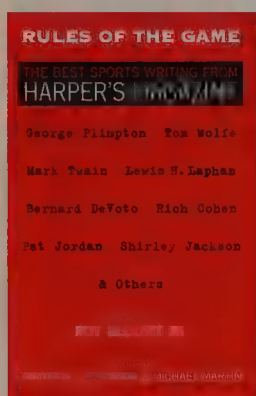
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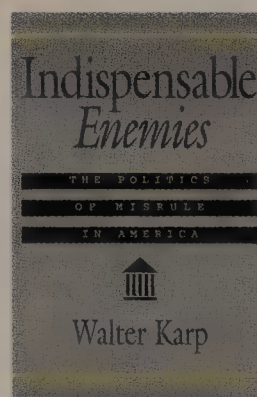
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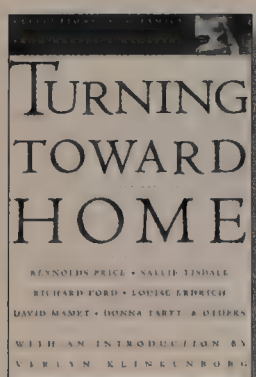
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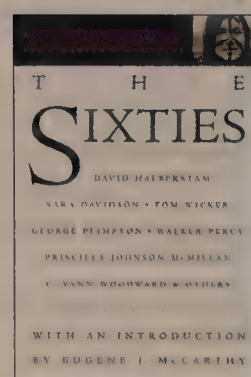


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# WRONG PRESCRIPTION?

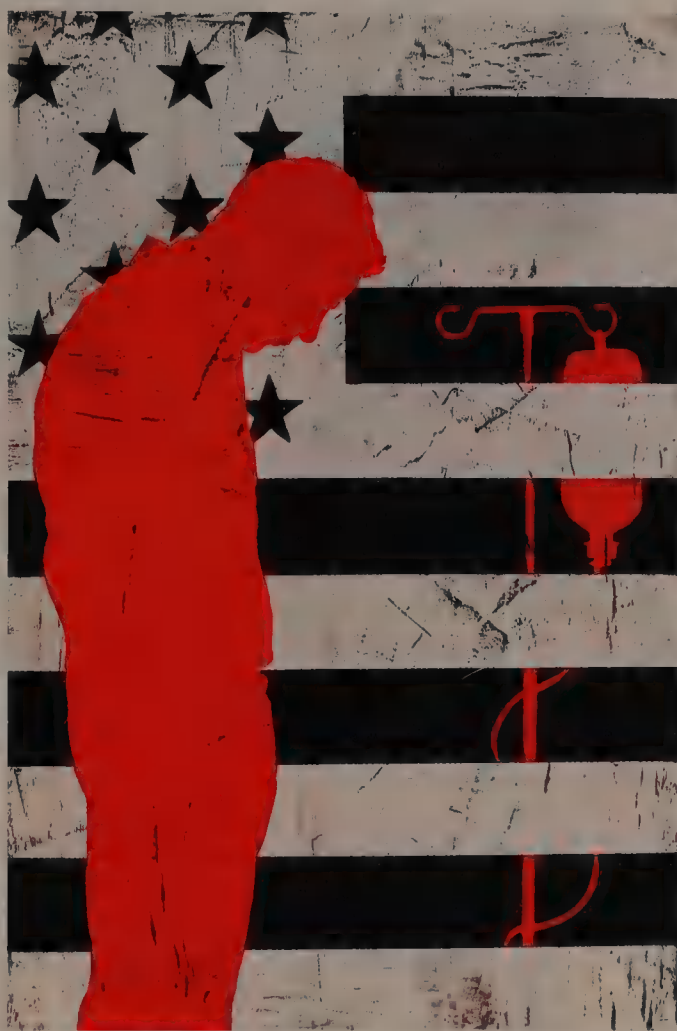
The failed promise of the Affordable Care Act

By Trudy Lieberman

In July 2009, as the Affordable Care Act moved through Congress, Steny Hoyer, the second-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, laughed at the idea that any legislator would actually read the bill before voting on it. If such full-body immersion were necessary to support the A.C.A., he said, “I think we would have very few votes.” In March 2010, just before the law passed, speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi made a similar point. Addressing a national conference of county officials, she declared, “We have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it, away from the fog of the controversy.”

Five years after its passage, the A.C.A. is not only the most hotly debated and vituperatively denounced law of the era—it is *still* shrouded in a fog of controversy. Many Americans have no idea how the bill works or what it was designed to accomplish. In March, a Kaiser Family Foundation study found “significant” knowledge gaps in the public’s understanding of the law. A third of the participants were unaware of

*Trudy Lieberman is a contributing editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, for which she covers health-care issues, and the author of Slanting the Story: The Forces That Shape the News (The New Press).*



the law’s key provision: offering subsidies for the uninsured.

It is no wonder Americans have been hard-pressed to learn anything about the actual workings of the A.C.A. There has been little criticism of the A.C.A. from the left, with prominent figures such as Paul Krugman, the economist and *New York Times* columnist, acting as cheerleaders. The right has confined itself to disinformation and risible smears, with G.O.P. presidential hopeful Ben Carson memorably

defining the A.C.A. as “the worst thing that has happened to this nation since slavery.” A lack of clarity on both sides—and some deliberate bait-and-switch tactics—dogged the very creation of the law.

The A.C.A. was sold to the public on the pledge of “affordable, quality health care.” This slogan, crafted in the shop of the Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, was incessantly pushed by everyone from grassroots advocates to top government officials, even as *healthcare.gov*, the new A.C.A. website, was crashing down around them in the fall of 2013. Trying to spin the disaster on *Meet the Press*, Pelosi grandly promised her viewers “more affordability, more accessibility, better-quality care, prevention, wellness, a healthier nation honoring the vows of our founders of life, a healthier life, [and] liberty to pursue their happiness.” President Obama, too, repeated the mantra at every opportunity. Shortly before the exchanges established by the law opened for business, he affirmed that uninsured Americans would now have “the same chance to buy quality, affordable health care as everyone else.”

Comments like these persuaded the public that the A.C.A. was

a vehicle for delivering universal health care, similar to what citizens had in other industrialized nations. It was not. Instead, the A.C.A. was a canny restructuring of the American health-care marketplace, one that delivered millions of new customers to insurance companies, created new payment mechanisms for hospitals, steered more business to pharmaceutical companies, and dictated expensive, high-tech solutions for a wide range of problems.

Perhaps these would have been reasonable trade-offs for truly universal coverage. But the Congressional Budget Office estimates that even under the A.C.A. there will be some 35 million Americans without health insurance, down from about 52 million when the law was passed. At a meeting of health-policy experts in February, Shoshanna Sofaer of the American Institutes for Research suggested that the A.C.A. should be held to the highest possible standard. In three to five years, she said, we would know whether the law led “to anything vaguely resembling universal coverage.” But this gets to the root of the problem. Whatever the slogans suggested, the A.C.A. was never meant to include everyone.

Essentially, the law is a means-tested program, like food stamps or Medicaid. It offers people the chance to buy private insurance online through a state- or federally run exchange, and to receive a government subsidy to help them pay their premiums. It is primarily aimed at the poor and the nearly poor: this year, 87 percent of A.C.A. enrollees qualified to receive monthly subsidies averaging \$263 per person (at least in the thirty-seven states with federally run exchanges). To its credit, the law also allowed sick people to buy insurance and more of the neediest Americans to qualify for Medicaid.<sup>1</sup> But in the twenty-one states that chose not to expand their Medicaid programs, the poorest of the poor are ineligible for A.C.A. subsidies and, in many cases, receive no help from the regular Medicaid program.

<sup>1</sup> Before the A.C.A., insurance companies routinely rejected applications from people who were sick, sometimes rejecting even those who had seemingly minor conditions, like migraines. On some occasions companies would accept sick people but waive any coverage for previously existing conditions.



And what of those middle-class Americans who were supposed to benefit from the law, and were promised that they could keep the policies and health providers they already had? They’ve already been hit with higher premiums and higher out-of-pocket costs—and people with top-of-the-line coverage from their employers will soon find those policies shrinking, thanks to a provision of the law that encourages companies to offer less-generous benefits.

It’s bad enough that the A.C.A. is fattening up the health-care industry and hollowing out coverage for the middle class. Even worse, the law is accelerating what I call the Great Cost Shift, which transfers the growing price of medical care to patients themselves through high deductibles, coinsurance (the patient’s share of the cost for a specific service, calculated as a percentage), copayments (a set fee paid for a specific service), and limited provider networks (which sometimes offer so little choice that patients end up seeking out-of-network care and paying on their own). What was once

good, comprehensive insurance for a sizable number of Americans is being reduced to coverage for only the most serious, and most expensive, of illnesses. Even fifteen years ago, families paid minimal deductibles of \$150 or \$200 and copays of \$5 or \$10, or none at all. Now, a family lucky enough to afford a policy in the first place may face out-of-pocket expenses for coinsurance, deductibles, and copays as high as \$13,200 before its insurer kicks in.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these out-of-pocket caps can be adjusted by the insurer every year, within limits set by the government, and there are no caps at all for out-of-network services, which means that some providers charge whatever the market will bear. In the post-A.C.A. era, you can be insured but have little or no coverage for what you actually need.

**T**he A.C.A.’s greatest legacy may finally be the fulfillment of a conserva-

<sup>2</sup> This estimate is for in-network services and includes deductibles, copays, and coinsurance. Obviously, the tab for out-of-network providers can go much, much higher.

tive vision laid out three decades ago, which sought to transform American health care into a market-driven system. The idea was to turn patients into shoppers, who would naturally look for the best deal on care—while shifting much of the cost onto those very consumers. In large part, this scheme was the brainchild of J. Patrick Rooney, whose Indianapolis-based Golden Rule Insurance Company specialized in selling policies to only the healthiest customers.

Rooney, a vegetarian who wore plastic rather than leather shoes to avoid killing animals, pioneered the marketing of high-deductible catastrophic insurance policies, which could be coupled with tax-advantaged saving accounts to pay for non-catastrophic health-care costs. These medical savings accounts (M.S.A.'s) made perfect sense to a free-market ideologue like Rooney, even if they were initially regarded as a screwball invention that ran contrary to the basic concept of comprehensive employer-based insurance. Rooney channeled millions of dollars from his company's political action committees to the campaigns of G.O.P. legislators. He walked the halls of the U.S. Capitol himself, sometimes making as many as ten thirty-minute visits a day to congressional offices.

Rooney also reached out to the media and the general public, funding groups like the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis (N.C.P.A.), a right-wing think tank whose hundreds of studies, backgrounders, and presentations provided intellectual ammunition for M.S.A.'s. In time, these efforts propelled Rooney's ideas into the mainstream policy conversation. In the early 1990s, M.S.A.'s were a "marketing failure but an intellectual triumph," recalled Greg Scandlen, who promoted them on behalf of the Council for Affordable Health Insurance, also founded by Rooney.

Congress authorized M.S.A.'s as a pilot program in 1996, then made them available to all Americans eight years later, at which point they were rechristened health savings accounts (H.S.A.'s). They had arguably become a marketing triumph at last. Twenty-six million people, or about 20 percent of all privately insured Americans, currently have high-deductible

health plans with H.S.A.'s or similar accounts. "Considering that H.S.A.'s were first offered in 2004," said Paul Fronstin, the director of health research at the Employee Benefit Research Institute, "twenty percent is a large number."

In other words, Rooney and his G.O.P. allies (with, it should be said, Democratic acquiescence) moved American health insurance in a direction contrary to that taken by most every other nation in the developed world. It is also contrary to the needs of those unlucky enough to get sick. Whereas insurers once asked policyholders to pay a nominal \$25 or \$50 for a doctor's visit or a CT scan, they now require them to foot as much as 25 or even 50 percent of the bill. What looks like a reasonably priced policy, at least in terms of premiums, can bring on sky-high bills and serious debt in no time.

For employers, of course, these policies are a bonanza: every dollar insurers save by shifting medical costs to consumers will lower the tab that employers pay for coverage. In 2011, Helen Darling, who was then head of the National Business Group on Health (which describes itself as the "only non-profit organization devoted exclusively to representing large employers' perspective on national health policy"), was quite frank about this equation. Moving from co-pays to coinsurance, she said, amounted to "a more subtle way to increase what the consumer pays. We are clearly seeing a march toward a more aggressive consumerist system."

That's just what John Goodman, who headed the N.C.P.A. for many years, had in mind two decades ago. Goodman is so identified with Rooney's ideas that he is frequently referred to as the "father of health savings accounts." I asked him to explain the success of consumer-driven plans. "They are the only plan out there that saves money," he told me. "They are a triumph for patient power. When you put money in the hands of employees, they spend less and are more careful buyers of care."

As it happens, patient power is mainly a benefit for employers—and insurers. Charles Kahn, who once lobbied for an insurance trade group and now heads the Federation of American Hospitals, told me that insurers

have finally gotten the products they always wanted. High-deductible plans add to the predictability of setting rates, he said. With a bigger share of the risk shifted to consumers, it's easier for insurers to make money.

For patients, however, the downside has been huge. Some become so frugal that they forgo even necessary care, with disastrous consequences for their health and their pocketbook. A RAND study completed in 1982, which is often cited to justify high-deductible plans, found that patients with high out-of-pocket costs did spend significantly less—but it also found that they couldn't distinguish between necessary and unnecessary care. A 2011 RAND study reached similar conclusions; it showed that people with high-deductible plans got less preventive care, even when such care was not subject to deductibles. Perhaps they didn't understand their policies, or their doctors weren't referring them for screening. In either case, the findings run counter to one of the widely touted justifications for the A.C.A.—that it will encourage more preventive care. The studies also emphasize that in many cases, so-called consumer-driven insurance policies yield less value for patients at almost any price.

**A**n affordability crisis is looming. Last fall, The Commonwealth Fund found that almost half of all insured adults with incomes of \$23,000 or less delayed or skipped care because of high cost-sharing expenses, regardless of which kind of insurance they had. In a December *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 46 percent of respondents described health-care costs as a hardship, up from 36 percent the previous year.

According to HealthPocket, a technology company that tracks insurance costs and has plans to sell policies of its own, the average deductible this year for bronze policies, the cheapest on the exchanges, is \$5,181 for individuals and \$10,545 for families. Even the more expensive silver plans offer average deductibles of about \$3,000 for individuals and \$6,000 for families—hardly sums to sneeze at. At least some buyers of silver plans can receive additional

subsidies to help with cost-sharing.<sup>3</sup> For Americans with bronze plans, there is no such extra boost. The perversity of selling cheap government-subsidized policies to the poor, then sticking them with gigantic out-of-pocket costs, can hardly be lost on the 2.6 million people who opted for bronze plans on exchanges this year.

The pricing of premiums, too, calls into question a leading premise of the A.C.A. Caroline Pearson, a senior vice president at the consulting firm Avalere Health, concedes that premiums on the exchanges have so far “turned out to be lower than what policymakers expected. But that still doesn’t make them affordable for people on limited incomes.” Even for families with incomes between \$40,000 and \$80,000, she says, “the math doesn’t work out.” In other words, the subsidies diminish rapidly as income rises, meaning that even slightly wealthier Americans may find it hard to afford health care. This helps to explain why about 22 percent of those who signed up on the federal exchange in 2014 did not come back this year. Roughly a third of enrollees on the state exchanges also declined to renew their policies. It’s possible that some of these Americans found coverage from employers, or from insurers selling policies outside the exchanges. But some surely gave up because they couldn’t afford the premiums or the cost-sharing—they couldn’t afford to be sick.

“We will replace the crisis of uninsurance with the crisis of underinsurance,” says Jonathan Oberlander, a health-policy expert at the University of North Carolina. “Evidence from other countries does not support the notion that you have to control costs by making sick people pay more.” The statistics bear out this assertion. In 1970, Canada and the United States spent roughly the same proportion of GDP on medical care: about 7 percent. More than four decades later, the United States spends about 17 percent of GDP on medical care—Canada spends 10 percent—and Americans have the highest out-of-pocket costs in the world. Canadi-

ans pay nothing to providers or hospitals at the point of service, although they may have to wait for many elective procedures—the kind of rationing used to vilify Canadian health care, almost always by Americans.

**I**ronically, the high cost-sharing now so prevalent in the United States has brought about its own form of rationing—by price. Americans may wait as long as their Canadian counterparts for an elective procedure, if only because they’re anxiously socking away pennies to pay for it. Still, no amount of evidence from abroad is likely to prevent consumer-driven plans from becoming the cost-control method of choice for medical providers, insurers, drug makers, and employers—the same stakeholders that have always stymied real reform in this country.

Legislators whose coffers were bulging with campaign contributions from those very stakeholders made sure the A.C.A. did not include serious cost-control remedies. Indeed, both Obama and Congress were eager to embrace Nineties-era Republican nostrums, including tepid cost controls and high-deductible plans, because they hoped to avoid the sort of pitched battle that had torpedoed earlier attempts at reform. The essential elements of the A.C.A.—an individual mandate to have insurance, subsidies to help people buy it, shopping exchanges—were, like M.S.A.’s, first mentioned in academic circles by conservatives during the early years of that decade. These ideas eventually became mainstream through smart lobbying and educational efforts, and were, to some degree, enshrined in the 2006 Massachusetts law spearheaded by Mitt Romney.

In late 2010, after the fierce backlash against the A.C.A. had begun and the G.O.P. swept the midterm elections, the president appeared on *60 Minutes* to reflect on his party’s drubbing. Obama acknowledged that health-care reform had “proved as costly politically as we expected”—hardly earth-shattering news. More surprising was his frank admission that the law had been taken straight from the Republican playbook. “We thought if we shaped a bill that wasn’t that different from bills that had previously been introduced by Republi-

cans, including a Republican governor in Massachusetts who’s now running for president, that we would be able to find some common ground there,” Obama said. “And we just couldn’t.”

Perhaps Obama’s admission accounted for what at first seemed to be minimal opposition from mainstream Republicans as debate over the A.C.A. unfolded in 2009 and early 2010. Or maybe the G.O.P. was already confident that it could demonize the law after it passed, and thereby push the public dialogue toward the party’s vision of a market-driven system that has as little government interference as possible.

If that was the Republicans’ goal, they succeeded. Negative advertising in the 2012 and 2014 campaigns, and the unwillingness of many Democrats to defend the A.C.A. or even mention it on the stump, has shifted the national conversation about health care. It has almost certainly precluded any substantial consideration of a truly universal health-insurance system for the foreseeable future. It’s not just that insurers, politicians, and industry lobbyists are determined to prevent such a system—even the public may have turned against the idea.

Last fall, Robert Blendon, the director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program, reviewed twenty-seven public-opinion polls conducted by fourteen organizations. One of the things he hoped to learn was whether voters believed that it was the federal government’s responsibility to make sure that all Americans had health coverage. Blendon found that in 2007, as the presidential-primary season was getting under way, 64 percent of respondents answered affirmatively. By 2014, the number had dipped to 47 percent. To some degree, this decline may reflect deteriorating faith in the government’s ability to solve *any* domestic problem, let alone the leviathan of health care. But Blendon also blamed what he called the “extraordinary level of paid negative advertising” aimed at the A.C.A. The ads, he told me, “raised fears that people were going to lose something under this plan.”

As the Great Cost Shift continues and more Americans find themselves staggering under the weight of medical bills, support for the law could nose-dive even further. And whether Republicans

<sup>3</sup> Silver-plan enrollees with incomes up to about \$60,000 for a family of four qualify for these subsidies. These plans are also less likely to hit policyholders with pricey co-insurance fees.

take the White House next year or simply hang on to their congressional majorities, they will continue to target the A.C.A. There is, for example, a sixty-five-page prescription for “Transcending Obamacare” issued by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research that calls for a “consumer-driven health care revolution, one that could substantially improve the quality of health care that every American receives, and restore America’s place as the world’s most dynamic economy.”

I talked to Avik Roy, one of the institute’s health experts, about what this meant on a policy level. “The argument I’m making,” he said, “audience by audience, paper by paper, is that we can make health care more affordable with less government intervention.”

How? Roy says he isn’t calling for the wholesale destruction of the A.C.A.: he has no interest in taking coverage away from people who have already obtained it, or wiping out insurance exchanges. “I think Obamacare is bad law,” he told me. “But having said that, the A.C.A. has been incredibly helpful with its principle that people should shop for their own plans. That has been very beneficial in the policy debate.” In Roy’s view, this aspect of the legislation will make it easier to “gradually migrate” Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, as well as those with employer-sponsored insurance, to exchanges. In other words, the A.C.A. will eventually succeed in fulfilling the G.O.P.’s favorite health-care daydream, in which every single bargain-hunting American buys coverage directly from a private insurer.

It’s instructive to look at how the A.C.A. has fared in individual states, and nowhere has it been pushed harder or denounced more vociferously than in Tennessee. During the debate over the bill, Tony Garr sent out almost daily email blasts stressing the importance of “affordable, quality healthcare” and traveled the state drumming up support for the law. A grassroots advocate and former director of the Tennessee Health Care Campaign, Garr hoped the bill would help the state grapple with an ongoing crisis. Just a few years earlier, in 2005, Governor Phil Bredesen had cut thousands of citizens from TennCare, a

state-run insurance program that became too expensive largely because of cost overruns from managed-care companies. The A.C.A. held out the promise of at least some protection for Tennessee’s poor.

The very poorest residents of the state are no better off today than they were before the law was passed. Presented with the chance to expand its Medicaid program under the auspices of the A.C.A., which allocated federal dollars to pick up almost the entire tab for the first few years, Tennessee declined (as have twenty-one other states).<sup>4</sup> This has left as many as 500,000 of the state’s poorest residents without insurance, while thousands more, who qualified for subsidized coverage, are struggling with high cost-sharing and coinsurance.

Teresa Birdsong, for example, is a fifty-three-year-old woman whose annual income of about \$21,600 comes from cleaning houses three days a week. She is just the sort of person the A.C.A. was intended to help—and to an extent, it has. Until recently, she was uninsured, and she suffered from high blood pressure and diabetes. Only after she bought an A.C.A. policy and got regular care and the right drugs did her blood sugar drop. “I feel good and able to work,” she said. “I’m so grateful for the insurance.”

Yet paying for her treatment and drugs remains a challenge. Birdsong’s current policy, a silver plan, requires her to pay up to 30 percent of her medical expenses, which are partly offset by extra cost-sharing subsidies. She told me that her maximum annual out-of-pocket expense is a reasonable-sounding \$550—but since the year was still young when we spoke, she had \$290 to go before insurance kicked in. That’s on top of \$230 in bills left over from last year’s cost-sharing, which Birdsong was whittling down at a rate of \$30 per month. “It’s all I can afford to pay,” she said.

Michele Johnson, who heads the Tennessee Justice Center, argues that

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia have embraced a full, no-strings-attached Medicaid expansion. Seven more grant coverage to eligible residents while imposing cost-sharing and other onerous requirements that further reinforce the system’s inequalities. The A.C.A., incidentally, pressured states to accept Medicaid expansion by threatening to cut off all prior Medicaid funding. The option to refuse such expansion without penalty was granted by the Supreme Court in 2012.

the law “is not perfect—but from our perspective, we can still take some improvements.” Certainly, there have been improvements. Since the A.C.A. was passed, 234,000 additional Tennesseans have become insured (about 3.5 percent of the entire population). And in February, it seemed that even more might gain coverage, as Governor Bill Haslam convened a special session of the state legislature to debate whether Tennessee should expand Medicaid.

At the hearing in Nashville, there seemed to be many reasonable arguments in favor of expansion: poor residents would be healthier, hospitals would have fewer nonpaying patients, and the state’s economy would benefit. There was favorable testimony from many private citizens, as well as from the Tennessee Hospital Association. But in the end, the measure was defeated by a 7–4 vote—not a surprising outcome given the reflexive opposition to government interference by red states such as Tennessee. “Their minds were made up,” Garr told me. “The legislators had already decided for political reasons they weren’t going to vote for it.”

One witness at the hearing was Kenneth Wilburn, a fifty-eight-year-old former state employee who was injured on the job while helping a work crew close down a correctional facility. The state laid him off, then dropped his insurance without telling him; his lapse in coverage came to light only when Wilburn had shoulder surgery and was stuck with \$60,000 in bills. After his testimony, Wilburn got a standing ovation. “I was like a rock star,” he recalled. “Everyone wanted to stick a microphone in my face.” Still, his tale didn’t sway the legislators, and once the spotlight moved on, he was back where he had started. “I have no insurance now and can’t get it,” he told me.

In all sorts of ways, that hearing in Nashville exemplified the poisonous politics surrounding the A.C.A. Much of the opposition at the hearing came from the Beacon Center, a conservative Nashville think tank, and from Americans for Prosperity, a national organization with links to the Koch brothers. Several hundred people wearing red AMERICANS FOR PROSPERITY T-shirts jammed the hearing room. “I’m skeptical of government-run programs,” said one A.F.P. foot soldier,

while allowing that he liked Medicare and had “paid into it my whole life.” There was also an opening invocation and prayer against Medicaid expansion from a representative of the Cumberland Missionary Society: “O Lord, save Tennessee for Jesus’ sake, and I pray that your will would be done, that *you* would be our coverage, that we would not be forced into these edicts from Washington, D.C. or any other quarter.”<sup>5</sup>

**H**aving failed a substantial part of the population it was actually designed to help, the A.C.A. is also wreaking havoc on the middle class, much of which had good insurance to begin with. For this blessing, Americans can largely thank the MIT economist Jonathan Gruber. Few people were as influential in crafting the A.C.A. His economic models helped determine the subsidies that people received and shaped other aspects of the law. He was the go-to guy for the press, always ready with a memorable sound bite. (On certain occasions, he may have been a little too memorable, describing the American voter as “stupid” and arguing that “lack of transparency” was “a huge political advantage” in passing the Affordable Care Act.)

In any case, the so-called Cadillac tax owes much to Gruber’s salesmanship. Most Americans are still in the dark about this stealth feature of the A.C.A., which will take effect in 2018. Essentially, it’s a 40 percent levy on the value of employer-sponsored health insurance above \$27,500 for family plans and \$10,200 for individuals, payable by employers. The provision will result in millions of workers losing their generous policies. Why? Because employers, seeking to reduce the value of their benefit packages to avoid paying the tax, will eliminate expensive options such as

fertility treatments, reduce or end retiree coverage, cut their contributions to H.S.A.’s or drop them entirely, and increase the cost-sharing on whatever reduced coverage remains.

The name suggests that only a select few Americans will be hit by the Cadillac tax. In fact, the impact will be widespread. “It’s going to affect almost every plan as the years go on,” says Steve Wojcik, a vice president at the National Business Group on Health. “I don’t think people know they’re going to be affected.” Eventually, the skin-in-the-game theory of cost control will reach those much higher on the income ladder, bringing us closer still to Pat Rooney’s grand design for health insurance.

Gruber and other economists had long pushed for a tax on rich benefit packages in order to, as he put it, “get rid of the regressive, inefficient, and expensive tax subsidy to employer health insurance.” There is a certain logic to this argument. In this country, employer-based insurance originated right after World War II, when wage controls prevented many companies from beefing up salaries. To attract talent, they began offering benefits like health insurance—and the government encouraged the practice by allowing them to write off the costs of providing that coverage.

Appearing on *PBS NewsHour* two months before the A.C.A. passed, Gruber tried to minimize the impact of the Cadillac tax. Some employers “get an enormous tax break,” he insisted, “and we’re going to slightly scale that back and use the money to cover uninsured people”—a move he predicted would raise \$150 billion for the federal government. But he said that those Americans lucky enough to be insured by such policies needn’t fear. The A.C.A. provision would move them from “very, very generous” plans to those that are “merely very generous,” Gruber told viewers. As the Cadillac tax helped to control spiraling medical costs, he added, it would also result in higher wages across the board, with most of those gains going to workers with incomes under \$200,000.

Despite Gruber’s claims, however, it’s not only the wealthy who will lose their high-quality insurance. It’s also middle-income workers in unionized industries, government employees, and others in

traditional manufacturing jobs. There’s some evidence that companies are already anticipating the impact of the Cadillac tax. For example, 135,000 auto workers will find their benefits at risk in this year’s contract negotiations. The tax will also hit people like Jeremy Devor, an engineering assistant in Illinois whose health-insurance troubles I’ve followed for the past few years. Devor earns about \$55,000 before taxes, slightly above the national median income of \$52,250, but he’s had good insurance, with a very low deductible and small copays.

Even so, Devor has not been able to afford family coverage, the average premium for which shot up 73 percent over the past decade, faster than the median family income. And things are about to get much, much worse. Workers in his firm have been told to expect a change in coverage later this summer, with much higher deductibles and copays. In 2013, people in Devor’s situation might have already been spending 10 percent of their income on premiums and cost-sharing. That amount is sure to increase as the Cadillac tax begins to bite. “We won’t go to the doctor when we need to,” Devor told me. “So untreated illnesses will progress until we are forced to go to the emergency room.” Here is another practice the A.C.A. was designed to eliminate. Yet a recent poll of emergency physicians found a surge in ER visits since the law took effect.

**G**rubner may have believed that the Cadillac tax would control costs, and perhaps it ultimately will. But remarks he made at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, in March 2010, just a few days before the A.C.A. passed, suggested a much deeper problem. “The only way we’re going to stop our country from becoming a latter-day Roman Empire and falling under its own weight is to get control of the growth rate of health-care costs,” he said. “The problem is, we don’t know how.”

What Gruber was saying is that we don’t know how under the constraints imposed by the system’s powerful stakeholders. Real cost control, as it exists in most other countries, is based on the power of the government pushing back against providers through negotiations and budgets. We don’t do that here.

<sup>5</sup> A few weeks after the hearing, Beth Harwell, the speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives, appeared on a local public-affairs TV show. She explained that the committee’s rejection of Medicaid expansion wouldn’t prevent the governor from initiating a new conversation with the federal government in two years. By then, she hoped, America might “have a president open to a block grant and [we] will be able to put true reform into health care in the state of Tennessee.” Block grants are often an invitation to cut programs and reallocate the funds elsewhere.

During the past few years, the growth in health-care costs has actually slowed, thanks in part to a \$716 billion cut in Medicare payments that was used to fund A.C.A. subsidies. The cut is permanent, and as a result, Medicare payments to doctors and hospitals will be about 11 percent lower in 2021 than they would have been otherwise. There is “no question that A.C.A. payment cuts have mattered,” Jonathan Oberlander told me. “We know that in medicine, price regulation works. But a national fee schedule is a very, very difficult thing to do in the United States.”

The nation’s hospitals have done their best to fight any further cuts in Medicare reimbursements. In March, they took their case to the people, hoping to enlist their help in lobbying Congress. The Coalition to Protect America’s Health Care, a consortium of hospitals and their state associations, ran TV ads, gathered signatures, and used social media to warn the public that cuts could mean longer waits in the ER and less access to high-end medical technology.

Charles Kahn, of the Federation of American Hospitals, elaborated for me: “Health reform is not living up to what we expected.” When hospitals, which account for about one third of U.S. health spending, agreed to earlier cuts, they expected that the pool of newly insured Americans would make up the difference, along with reducing charity care and bad debt. To some extent it has, but apparently not enough to satisfy the hospitals. The idea, Kahn told me, was that the law would cover 91 to 93 percent of Americans. “It’s not at the level we anticipated because the states didn’t expand Medicaid,” he said. “Even the exchanges have not met expectations.”<sup>6</sup>

Unable to go head-to-head with hospitals or the big drug companies,

<sup>6</sup> Overall enrollment in the A.C.A. remains lower than expected. California and New York, the states with the largest exchanges, have experienced less than robust growth, with California retaining only about two thirds of those who signed up last year—which translates into 1 percent growth for 2015, at least to date. As Caroline Pearson put it: “Does this mean growth will be smaller forever? Or will we just take longer to get there?”

the drafters of the A.C.A. instead embraced less contentious methods for reducing costs. These included discouraging fee-for-service payments to physicians in favor of bundled payments, which would cover all the services needed for an episode of care; penalizing hospitals for too many readmissions; and encouraging accountable-care organizations (A.C.O.’s), which are supposed to allow doctors and hospitals to coordinate treatments, thereby lowering costs and improving the quality of the actual services.

These ideas are all worth exploring. But early analysis suggests that they have had little meaningful impact. Alan Weil, the editor of *Health Affairs*, has argued that the shift to bundled payments is flawed and insufficiently disruptive—there’s no evidence that it will achieve its goals. According to Scott Smith, the managing CEO of Medical City Dallas, a highly profitable hospital, the old fee-for-service model is “what our physicians want—and they want to maintain that for as long as they can.”

As for A.C.O.’s, the news is a little more promising. A recent report on the government’s pilot program indicated savings of more than \$384 million in its first two years of operation. However, these gains were inconsistent, with some A.C.O.’s barely breaking even or losing money. And of the thirty-two organizations selected for the program, thirteen have already dropped out. One was San Diego’s Sharp HealthCare, which called the A.C.O. model “financially detrimental.”

The A.C.A. pinned similar hopes on digitizing medical records. Robert Wachter, the chief of the Division of Hospital Medicine at UCSF Medical Center and an expert on health IT, said that substantial savings may well materialize from such efforts, but not for five to ten years. A 2005 RAND study determined that health IT could eventually save \$81 billion a year, but more recent research found inconclusive evidence of cost reductions so far. Record-keeping systems are still rudimentary, and the biggest problem is that the systems don’t talk to one another: in many cases, the electronic record your doctor uses cannot be read



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by the hospital or by another doctor trying to coordinate treatment.

There's a reason for this electronic babel. As part of the 2009 stimulus bill, the government allocated \$35 billion to health IT, of which \$28 billion has already been spent. Lawmakers declined to include any real standards or specifications—and nearly 800 vendors, small and large, rushed to cash in, swamping the market with more than 2,500 products. Each system creates its own record and may encode it differently from others, says David Whitlinger, the executive director of the New York eHealth Collaborative. Six years later, there are still no standards. "Congress has tried to direct the Office of the National Coordinator to mandate interoperability," Whitlinger told me, "but there's reluctance at the federal level to mess with commerce." The market is slowly consolidating, as markets always do. In the meantime, Whitlinger says, "There's a lot of money to be made."

But even if the A.C.A. wrings substantial savings out of these initiatives, and even if health-care costs stop rising, the law does little or nothing to contain the price of prescription drugs. Spending on these medications rose 6.4 percent from December 2013 to December 2014, a rate not seen in two decades, and it is unlikely to dip anytime soon.

"Drug manufacturers can raise prices to whatever they want," says Peter Bach, a physician and epidemiologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering, in New York City, who has studied the pricing of cancer drugs. "The worst thing that happens to them is that a story gets written and the practice continues." Cancer drugs in particular have proved a cash cow for Big Pharma. Not only are prices rising rapidly but, according to Bach's research, the number of new drugs approved annually has tripled since 1990.

Yet the A.C.A. reaffirmed an earlier agreement that kept the government out of drug pricing. The Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 gave seniors a much-needed prescription-drug benefit—but it simultaneously prohibited the program from negotiating prices for any of the medications it bought. When the A.C.A. came along, the president piggybacked a new deal on the old one. Medicare would not engage in price negotiations, and phar-

maceutical makers agreed to discount expensive brand-name drugs for beneficiaries who had reached the infamous "donut hole" in their coverage.<sup>7</sup> It was a win-win: the president got a new benefit he could use to sell the law, and Big Pharma got a vast new market for its products without any price controls.

The U.S. government's unwillingness to use its negotiating power to control costs puts it at odds with almost every other industrialized nation.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Medicare is also barred from considering the price of a drug in its coverage decisions, leaving it up to private insurers, who often have cozy relationships with the pharmaceutical industry, to supply what weak oversight there is. This means that stratospheric prices for new specialty drugs like Sovaldi, a hepatitis C treatment that costs up to \$84,000 per patient, are factored into the insurance premiums that we all pay. Indeed, a ProPublica investigation found that Sovaldi and similar drugs accounted for \$4.5 billion of Medicare spending last year—more than fifteen times what Medicare had spent the year before for older hepatitis medications.

**T**he biggest winners, of course, are the insurance companies themselves—especially those that grew and consolidated over the past few decades. The law has handed them millions of new customers. Competition is unlikely to drive down costs; five big insurers now dominate the market, making it extremely difficult for newcomers to gain a toehold.

The A.C.A. did authorize two dozen nonprofit insurance cooperatives to compete with the big companies.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to the A.C.A., Medicare paid for 75 percent of an enrollee's medications until the total cost reached \$2,800. At this point, enrollees hit the donut hole and were responsible for all drug bills until their annual out-of-pocket spending reached \$4,550. Then Medicare stepped back in, at the higher reimbursement rate of 95 percent—but many senior citizens were unable to manage the temporary cost-sharing burden.

<sup>8</sup> The president's most recent budget breaks with tradition, giving Medicare the power to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical makers. Whether this provision will be included in the final bill is anybody's guess, but with Republicans controlling both houses of Congress, it seems unlikely.

Twenty-two remain in business, but it's not clear whether they can survive. Though the low premiums of Colorado's co-op insurer, Colorado HealthOP, helped it capture the biggest share of policies sold on the state exchange in 2015, its long-term solvency is doubtful. Iowa's CoOpportunity Health, which also served thousands of customers in Nebraska, failed earlier this year, after receiving less federal support and covering more seriously ill patients than it expected. Indeed, there is some evidence that Congress—most likely at the urging of big insurers—does not want the cooperatives to succeed after all. A couple of years ago, legislators cut off funding for new co-ops and rescinded 90 percent of the uncommitted loan funds that were available to them.

If cooperatives go under, there will be even less competition. In California, for example, four big carriers sell 94 percent of the policies on the exchanges. "Not only is there significant market concentration," said David Jones, the state's insurance commissioner, "but only three insurers are selling statewide." Throughout much of California, Jones told me, this lack of competition "has tremendous implications for price and choice."

As long as market competition is restricted and there is no rate regulation (which is the case in fifteen states), rates will go up, Jones warns. Last fall, California insurers spent more than \$55 million to defeat a ballot proposition that would have allowed the insurance commissioner to regulate rates. Early on, in August, 70 percent of Californians favored the measure. But in the wake of an industry-subsidized advertising blitz that linked the proposition to the A.C.A., the electorate changed its mind: in November, 60 percent voted to defeat the proposition. Even in states like New York, where regulators have so far held down rates, consumers have no guarantee that premiums won't eventually skyrocket.

It's still too early to judge whether the A.C.A. has lowered insurance premiums across the board. To help compensate carriers for the added risk of insuring lots of sick people, the A.C.A. granted them special financial protections. This extra cash stops flowing after 2017. At that point, once carriers have been able to assess their bottom lines,

the A.C.A.'s impact will become clearer. Georganne Chapin, the former CEO of New York's Hudson Health Plan, is skeptical that any major savings are being passed along to the consumer. "You can depress premiums for a while," she told me, "but doctor and hospital costs are still going up. Carriers will just go out of business or shift costs to the people who buy the insurance. Every insurance company out there is on its own, cutting deals."

That includes Hudson Health, which recently made a deal with ENT and Allergy Associates, a group of more than 160 specialists practicing in New York and New Jersey. The group's rapid growth exemplifies what physicians all over the country are doing. Its CEO, Robert Glazer, is blunt about the broader strategy: whoever controls the patient population will have the upper hand in the battle between insurers and providers. The more people you serve, the easier it is to dictate prices.

The same battle is going on across the country, and the ultimate loser is almost always the consumer. As hospitals consolidate with one another and with physician groups, it's hard to count on competition to keep costs down. Massachusetts is the poster child in this respect. A judge there recently rejected a deal that would have allowed the Bay State's medical behemoth, Partners HealthCare, to acquire three community hospitals, largely because the acquisition could have increased local health-care spending by as much as \$49 million a year. Undaunted, Partners has suggested it will focus on expansion out of state.

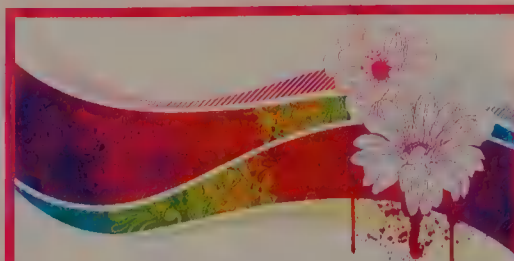
Shouldn't Massachusetts, which pioneered A.C.A.-style insurance exchanges almost a decade ago, be leading the nation in the law's implementation? Instead, it has the highest per capita health costs in the country, and health-care spending accounts for almost half of the state's current budget. Premiums are still rising, especially for workers in small businesses, who have been pinched by double-digit rate increases in seven of the past ten years. (The reason is that Romneycare merged the insurance risk pool, combining individual consumers and small employers—in effect, small employers subsidize indi-

viduals.) "It is no surprise to us in Massachusetts that the shortcomings of the basic framework of the Affordable Care Act mean marketplace discrimination for small businesses and their employees," argued Jon Hurst, the president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, in the *Boston Globe*.

**T**he A.C.A. has meanwhile ushered in new product-line opportunities for insurers and tech companies alike. HealthPocket, the insurance-tracking firm, is planning to introduce supplemental policies—i.e., insurance to be purchased in conjunction with A.C.A. policies. The idea is that consumers can compensate for their punishingly high deductibles and cost-sharing with a *second* policy. Score one for inefficiency! HealthPocket CEO Bruce Telkamp sees the new policies as a potential gold mine. "Long term, I believe, the A.C.A.-supplement product category could be as significant as the Medicare supplement is today," he told me. "There will be millions of plans sold each year in five to seven years."

What's the downside for policyholders, besides shelling out for more insurance? The maddening multiplication of plans, prices, and features will make it harder than ever to understand who pays for what and how much. This confusion is exactly what happened with Medigap policies, which were designed as supplemental plans for Medicare beneficiaries, before Congress strictly regulated them in the early 1990s.

Other companies, new and old, are muscling into the price-information sector, in which bots scan online databases to find the best prices for MRIs, CT scans, mammograms, and so forth. The business proposition? If people approach health care as consumers, they'll hunt for a bargain on gallbladder surgery, maternity care, or other procedures whose prices vary widely. One company hoping to cash in on this potentially lucrative opportunity is Healthcare Bluebook, based outside Nashville, which uses public and private data to collate prices and sells them to employers to share with their workers. (It also offers some free data for the public.) Not surprisingly,



## THE SIXTIES: RECOLLECTIONS OF THE DECADE FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE Introduction by Eugene J. McCarthy

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CEO Jeff Rice views his business model as a kind of civic service—a blow struck on behalf of transparency. “When people know how much things cost,” he told me, “they will naturally seek a good value, and that will bring prices down.”

**R**ice, along with most proponents of consumer-driven health care going all the way back to J. Patrick Rooney, assumes that we’re talking about a traditional market. In their view, choosing medical treatment should be like buying a car or canned peaches. If consumers have the right information, if there is sufficient transparency regarding prices and services, they will make the right choice.

But buying health care is not like buying a car. Most people aren’t going to sit up on the gurney, tell the surgeon that the hospital is too expensive, and take their liver transplant elsewhere. To get well, they need to trust their physicians—and since even the Yelp-like websites designed to rate practitioners and hospitals are notoriously spotty, many patients will stay with the tried and true. Meanwhile, insurers are tightening their provider networks, cutting deals only with the physicians who offer *them* the best prices. As a result, patients may actually have fewer choices. If a better doctor for your needs is not in your carrier’s network, you may be stuck paying out of pocket for superior care, or taking whatever your insurer offers and hoping for the best.

Shopping for the right insurance policy is no easier. Ideally, you would be able to factor the appropriate level of risk into your decision—but most people cannot. Paul Borghard, an upstate New York sheep farmer, recently learned this lesson the hard way. Borghard is hardly a novice when it comes to fine print and fiscal niceties—in fact, he has a graduate degree in business—and he spent days sifting through his options on the state insurance-exchange website. “I don’t know how the ordinary Joe who gets on that site can decipher whether he needs a higher copay, more coinsurance, a high out-of-pocket maximum, the drug deductible,” he told me. In many cases,

the website said one thing about benefits, the insurer said another. “When I picked a plan, I didn’t know exactly what the benefits were. I didn’t make an educated decision. I ended up with a decision by default.”

Only three companies sold policies in his area, on the New York–Vermont border. Two didn’t cover services in Vermont and New Hampshire, where he sometimes sought treatment. Did the remaining carrier include the providers and facilities that Borghard already used? He called the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire, and put the question to them directly. Good news: the hospital accepted his insurance.

Borghard signed up. At that point, he was perfectly healthy—but soon afterward, he developed a health condition and sought a consultation with a specialist at Dartmouth-Hitchcock. Then he learned that he had no coverage. The problem was that in order to keep his premiums down, he had purchased an HMO, which requires you to use doctors in a particular network; only a PPO, which allows you to go outside the insurer’s network, would have covered his visit to Dartmouth-Hitchcock. None of the materials he had examined earlier had made this exclusion completely clear, and in any case, Borghard wasn’t sick when he made his choice. Now he was stuck paying \$900 out of pocket, simply because he was unable, as he put it, to “look into a crystal ball and know what my medical services and needs would be for the coming year.”

Yet the fiction that people can control their own health-care destiny, and the narrative of the rational shopper, continue to delay the day when the United States will have to make real decisions about our high-priced, unequal, and insanely inefficient system. The A.C.A. didn’t invent this system, of course. But because of a failure of nerve and the immense power of health-care stakeholders, the A.C.A. has reinforced and accelerated many of the system’s most toxic features. Who should get quality health care? The poor, the rich, the vast middle in between? And how should we pay for it?

*King v. Burwell*, the latest legal challenge to the A.C.A., will be decided by the Supreme Court just as this article goes to press. The case hinges, absurdly enough, on a single four-word clause—“established by the state”—which, according to opponents of the law, prevents Americans from receiving subsidies on policies they have purchased from federal exchanges. The court’s verdict will determine the future of the law. But putting aside whatever decision may come down, it’s fair to ask: Is the A.C.A. better than nothing? Even with the law’s considerable defects, the answer is probably yes. It has expanded the number of the nation’s insured by 17 million, at least for now. And if the A.C.A. survives *King*, the decision may offer a fresh opportunity to assess the law’s shortcomings, and maybe even to fix some of them.

As I’ve suggested, the shortcomings are numerous. Too many Americans are still excluded; the process of buying insurance remains incredibly complicated; there is little regulation throughout much of the country; and millions of people are saddled with huge out-of-pocket expenses and lack the coverage they truly need. Fixing these problems would be a huge step forward. But even if that can be done, we will be left with the system’s fundamental flaw: high costs and our inability to effectively control them. The only way to fix *that* is to attack the stranglehold that drug companies, insurers, hospitals, and doctors have on the machinery of health care in this country—a bold move that has so far frightened away almost all contenders.

On a cold February night, New York assemblyman Richard Gottfried met with the Chelsea Reform Democratic Club in Manhattan. Gottfried pushed a new proposal for reforming health insurance, a plan he called New York Health. He argued that America rations care according to wealth, and that people are still going without. Some in the audience were skeptical. One woman worried that good doctors would leave the state, and that lines would snake around the block to see an average one. An audience member stood up and posed the question on everybody’s mind: “Wasn’t the Affordable Care Act supposed to solve all this?” ■

# TRAVEL DAY

Photographs of airports around the world

Essay by Geoff Dyer



When I was eight years old, in 1966, during a holiday with my parents, I traveled to Heathrow Airport for the first time. The reason I put it so clumsily is that we weren't flying anywhere. We were spending a week in London, and one morning we went out to see the airport and the planes coming and going. It was just like visiting the Tower of London or Bucking-

ham Palace, as we had on other days. Instead of being a point of departure, the airport was a destination and attraction in its own right. I had to wait fifteen years, until I was twenty-three, before I flew on a plane. My parents both died in 2011 without ever taking a flight.

In the Sixties and Seventies, air travel was perhaps no longer the exclusive preserve of a tiny elite, but the glamour of the "jet set"—whoever they were—was near its peak. The threat of terror was not so pervasive that an ill-judged joke could put an entire terminal

on lockdown. The contrast with today is brought out powerfully in a scene from 1975 in Terry Castle's memoir *The Professor*. Castle describes an unorthodox interview for a fellowship that takes place at Sea-Tac airport and ends with her and her interviewer sneaking around a corner to get wildly stoned. Consider also the climax of *Bullitt*, in which Steve McQueen pursues his suspect onto—and off—a plane at SFO. At one point, McQueen asks someone to get hold of "the security guard." Singular. It's fiction, granted, but the ease with which the chase moves airside and back is a not

Geoff Dyer's books include *Jeff in Venice*, *Death in Varanasi*, *Zona*, and *The Ongoing Moment*. His story "Forbidden City" appeared in the December 2014 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.



implausible reflection of the lax realities of the day.

The most important documentary record of American airports in the transitional phase between exclusivity and the present era of comfortless democratization is by Garry Winogrand. Actually, we could substitute almost any word for “airports” in the preceding sentence—“suburbs,” “cars,” “shops,” “clothes”—and it would still hold true. Through his insatiable eagerness to photograph, Winogrand became a one-man archive of the social landscape of the Sixties and Seventies. (The airport work was posthumously published in 2004 as *Arrivals and Departures*.)

The earliest U.S. airports were designed to look conservative and old-fashioned in order to reassure nervous fliers. By the Sixties, however, they gleamed with the sleek confidence of modernity. They became as emblematic of their age as railway stations were of nineteenth-century Britain. The long walkways beckoned like the promise of the space age itself.

But the situation is, as always in Winogrand, more complicated than that. Those same walkways, like the one at LAX that Lee Marvin walks down with such purposeful menace in *Point Blank*, often had an atmosphere of shared alienation. One image in particular seems akin to Paul Strand’s famous 1915 photograph of people hurrying to work on Wall Street. Strand described the windows lining the street as “a great maw into which the people rush.” His people are heading left, out of frame; Winogrand’s are striding toward us. In a few years they will *become* us—and vice versa. Together we will be condemned to an endless web of connecting flights, doomed to wander DFW or some other

place we never wanted to visit, simply because it’s a transit hub. Departing passengers will be funneled into a plane and emerge hours later in a place that is both entirely different from and pretty much the same as the one they have left.

This is the now-familiar environment and experience described by Marc Augé in his book *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Appropriately enough, a Winogrand picture was used on the cover of the first English-language edition: a vast aircraft whose face—with the cockpit windows as eyes—is pressed up against a departure lounge, like a giant version of the animals he photographed in zoos.

The lure of the future proved problematic in another way too: it accelerated the speed at which airports would start to look old. Some of the terminals at JFK now look as worn out as a pickup stacked on cinder blocks. At various times different airports held the lead as the largest, busiest, most efficient or technologically advanced, but no sooner was a new paradigm of airportness established at a particular site than it became overcrowded, inefficient, and old-looking. Winogrand’s style—he said that he liked to work “in that area where content almost overwhelms form”—was perfectly adapted to exploit this tension.

**T**he evolution of the fashions of commercial flight likewise reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. Pilots dress conservatively, in a style very obviously derived from a naval heritage. This has remained reassuringly unchanged. But the outfits of flight attendants tell a different story. As envisaged in the films of the Sixties, air travel and space travel

shared a wardrobe, though there was a chicken-and-egg quality to the relationship. Airlines wanted their employees to look futuristic, so the designs were informed by fictive visions of that future—but those visions were themselves extrapolations from existing fashion.

As for the passengers ... well, at JFK a couple of years ago I bumped into a very smartly dressed Phillip Lopate (born 1943), who explained that he belonged to a generation that dressed up when they took a flight. Winogrand captures this fluid collision of the casual (a woman in curlers!) with the kind of uncomfortable elegance that must have seemed essential for boarding a zeppelin. Being Winogrand, being the man who titled a book *Women Are Beautiful*, he is also alert to glimpses of romantic potential that are doomed, in this zone of constant comings and goings, to be no more than fleeting—and that cry out, as a consequence, to be permanently preserved on film.

In other words, Winogrand found in airports the very same dramas that he stalked obsessively in the streets of Manhattan. The difference is that the movements, gestures, and interactions were altered by a space designed specifically to create certain situations (being separated from or reunited with a loved one) and to facilitate coping with all the consequences of those situations: lost luggage, missed connections, etc. As such, his pictures are replete with frustration, disappointments, and boredom. A display board, for example, lists one flight after another as DELAY EQUIPMENT.

When Robert Doisneau came to England he was disappointed by what he found—or failed to find. On



the Continent, he said, when people missed a train they threw up their arms and made a fuss. In England, they sat down. Winogrand didn't need the gestural operatics that Doisneau missed. Along with everything else he was one of the great photographers of people sitting; he captured them stranded in some void as if that were the defining experience of their life.

In Winogrand's time, the experience of delayed flights, though inconvenient

the beaming face holding a sign that said WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA JANE, he captured the eternal promise of flight and of the American West in a single moment. I'm amazed the picture hasn't been blown up and installed permanently at LAX.

The twenty photographers whose images are collected in this portfolio update Winogrand's researches and expand our view to include airports all over the world. The assignment was simple: turn a travel day into a working day, documenting the terminals, waiting rooms, and checkpoints they passed through during the month of April. Remarkably, many of their pictures seem like prints from a newly discovered set of Winogrand's negatives. Others show the effects of the now inescapable security regime. If airports were once places to which

one made occasional and thrilling visits, now many of the people encountered in them have the look, in prison parlance, of "lifers." Arrivals and departures have given way to a perpetually transient residency.

Except for a few hellish enclaves, smoking has all but disappeared. And even though airports remain places where you still see banks of pay phones, the human dances they generate—much loved by Winogrand, who was always ducking into phone booths to check his answering service—have been depleted to the point of near extinction. In their place we have an ensemble cast of soloists on cell phones. People are present physically but are conversationally and psychically elsewhere: the non-place is now inhabited by the non-present. These two trends—less smoking, more phones—are related. Whereas the first thing people used to do after getting off a plane was to reach for their cigarettes, now they reach for their phones. As Jonathan Franzen has observed, we have gone from "nicotine culture to cellular culture."

And yet, for all the small, incidental changes (and photography, more than any other medium, is predicated on the incidental), what is striking is the way that the essential human dramas remain unchanged. "Dramas," plural, because—and this is the great thing about both Winogrand and the photographers represented here—so much is going on. Of all the things that are superfluous to a photographer, a knowledge of or interest in the human condition is close to the top of the list; what counts is an endless fascination with the arrangement of human faces, bodies, and clothes and the circumstances in which these humans find themselves. ■



and infuriating, had yet to acquire the cumulative tedium—the terminal lack of velocity—with which we are all now overfamiliar. Delay, boredom, and frustration had not been permanently imprinted on the idea of travel. In Winogrand's pictures both excitement and dread still hang in the balance. And he was on hand to take the second most joyous picture of someone stepping off a plane. The first, of course, is the wonderful—and ultimately heartbreaking—image by Slava Veder of Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Stirm being greeted by his family at Travis Air Force Base, in California, on March 17, 1973, after spending five years in captivity as a POW in Vietnam. That was an exceptional and newsworthy event. But when Winogrand saw the fellow with

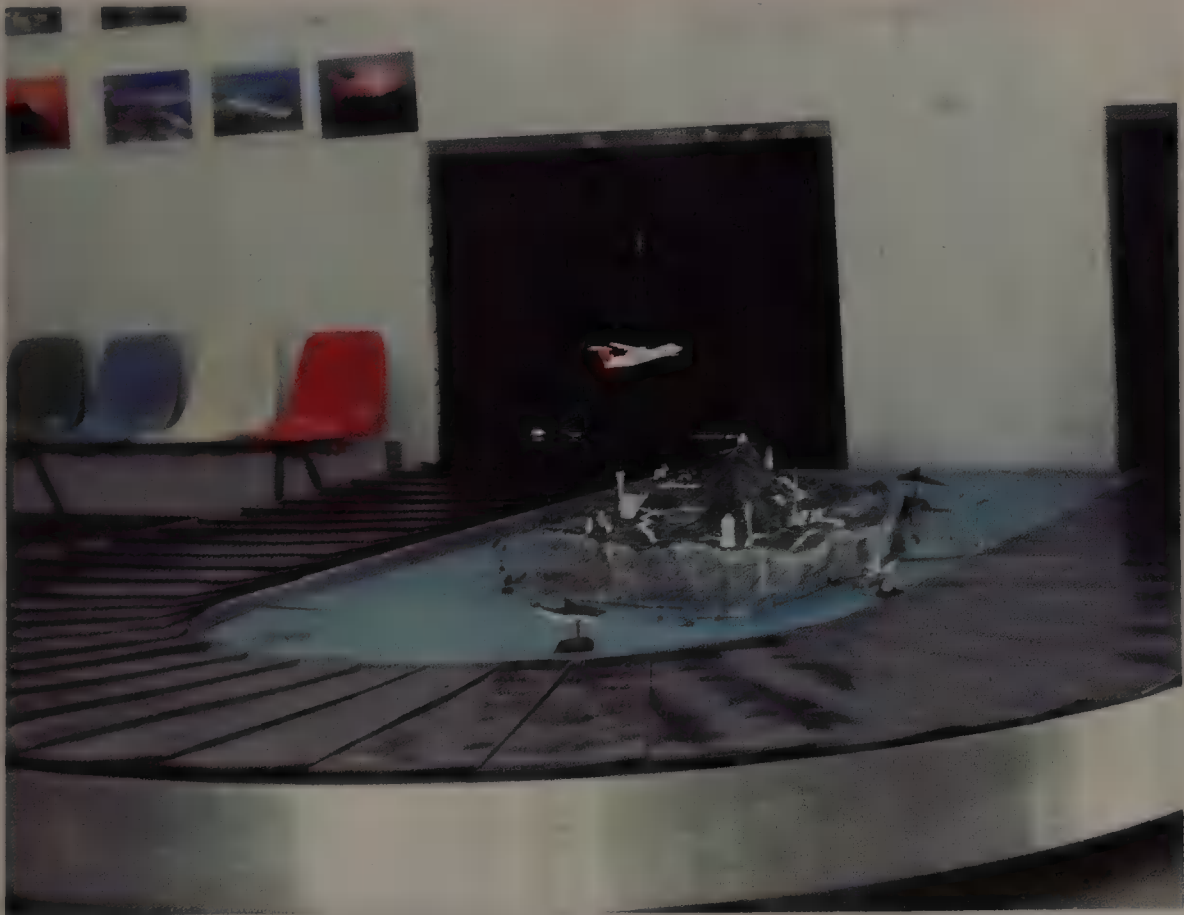






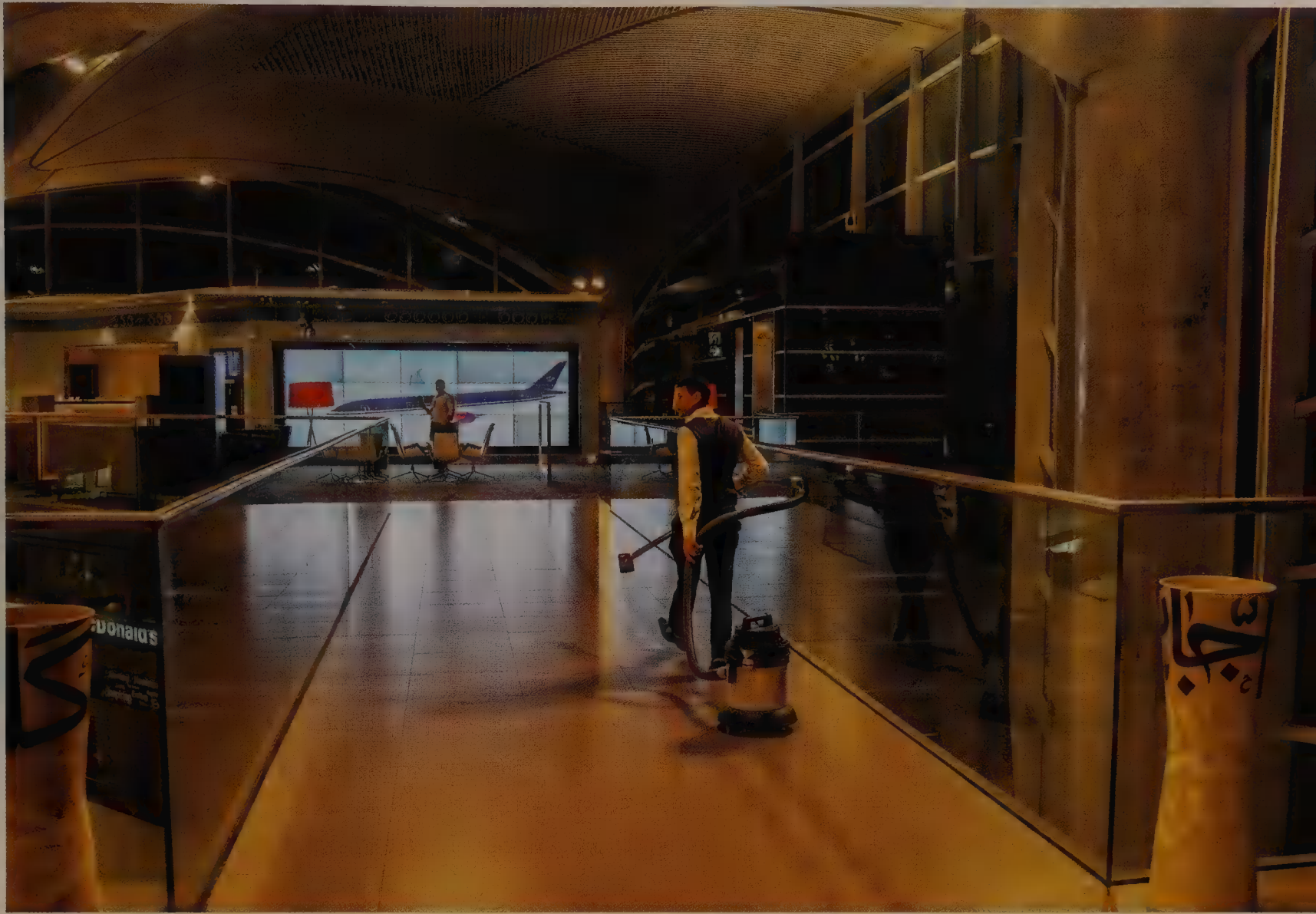


This page: Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, by Gus Powell  
 Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport, Serbia, by Andrea Bruce/NOOR Images  
 Opposite page: Vancouver International Airport, Canada, by Andrea Bruce/NOOR Images  
 Yonaguni Airport, Japan, by Hikaru Hayashi



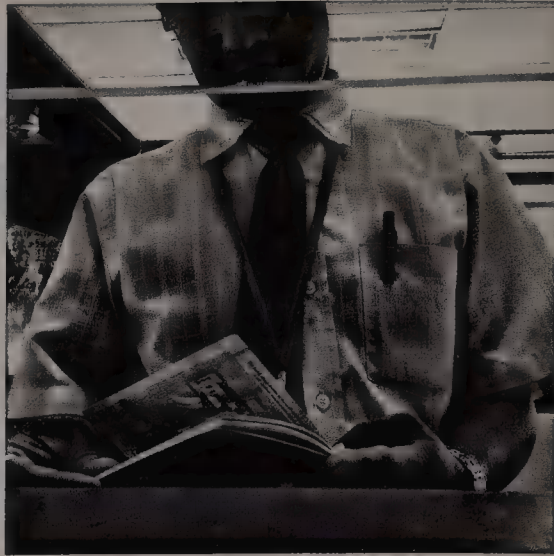


This page: Los Angeles International Airport, by Noah Rabinowitz  
 Tocumen International Airport, Panama City, Panama, by Rose Marie Cromwell  
 Sheremetyevo International Airport, Moscow, by Pavel Volkov  
 Opposite page: Queen Alia International Airport, Amman, Jordan, by Guy Martin  
 Charlotte Douglas International Airport, N.C., by Gus Powell  
 Overleaf: McCarran International Airport, Las Vegas, by Benjamin Lowy





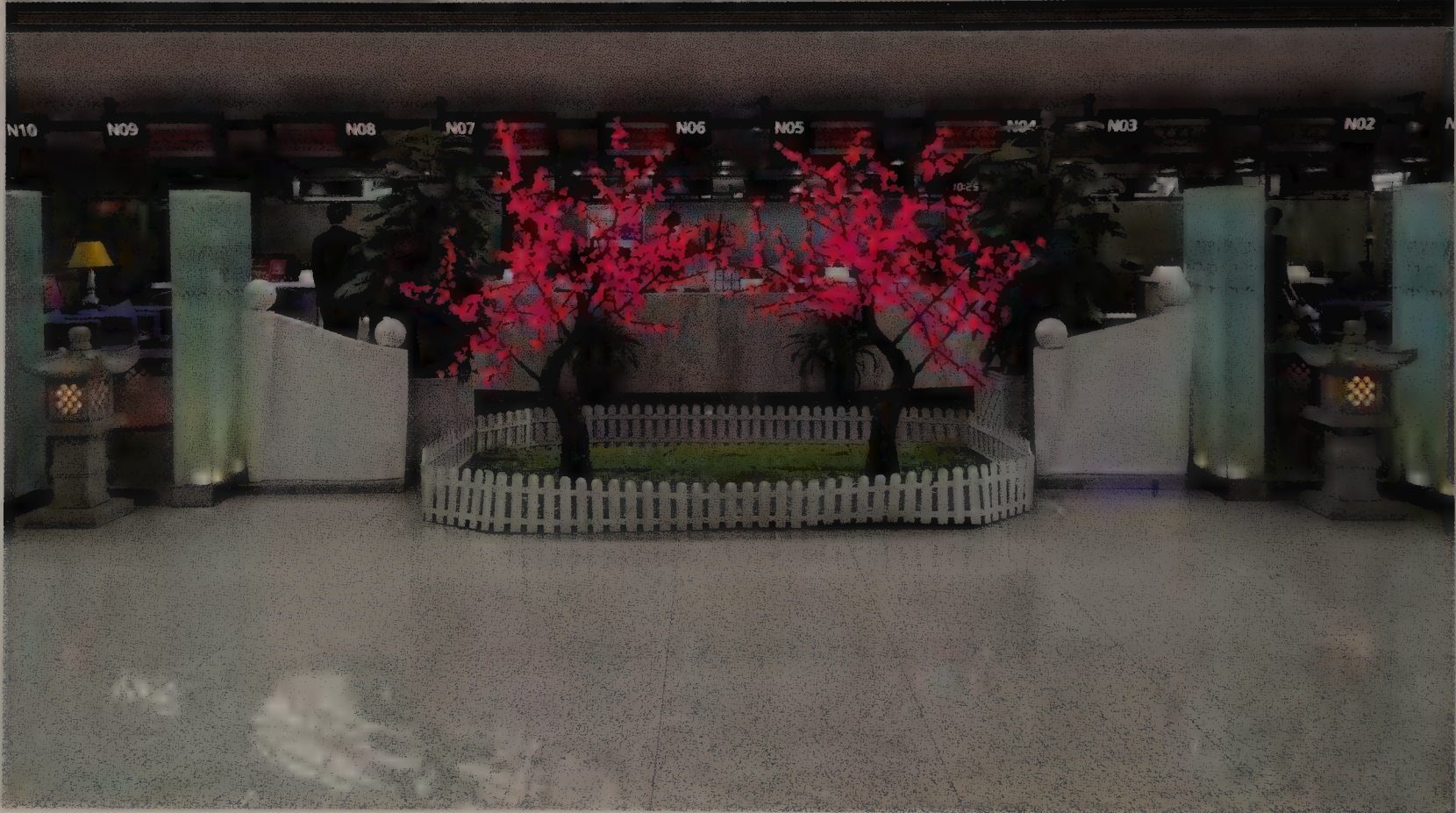
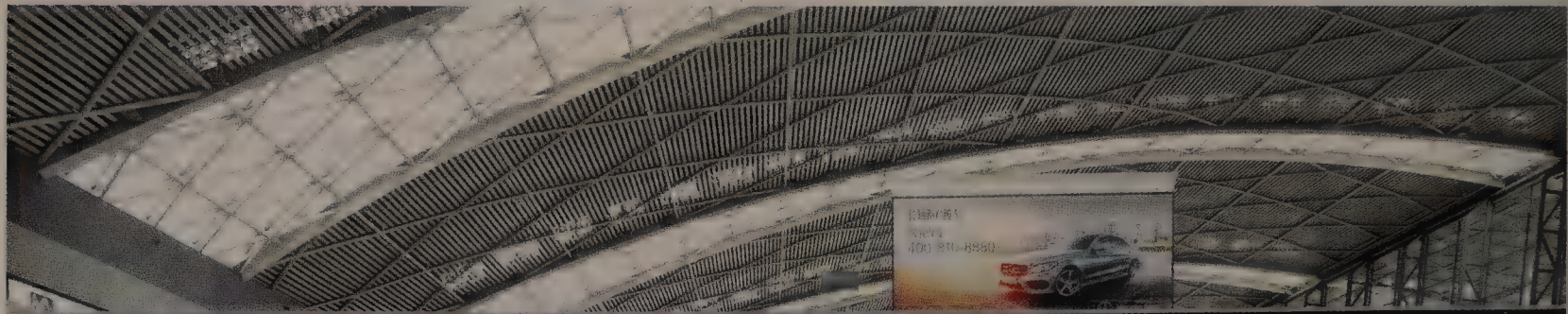
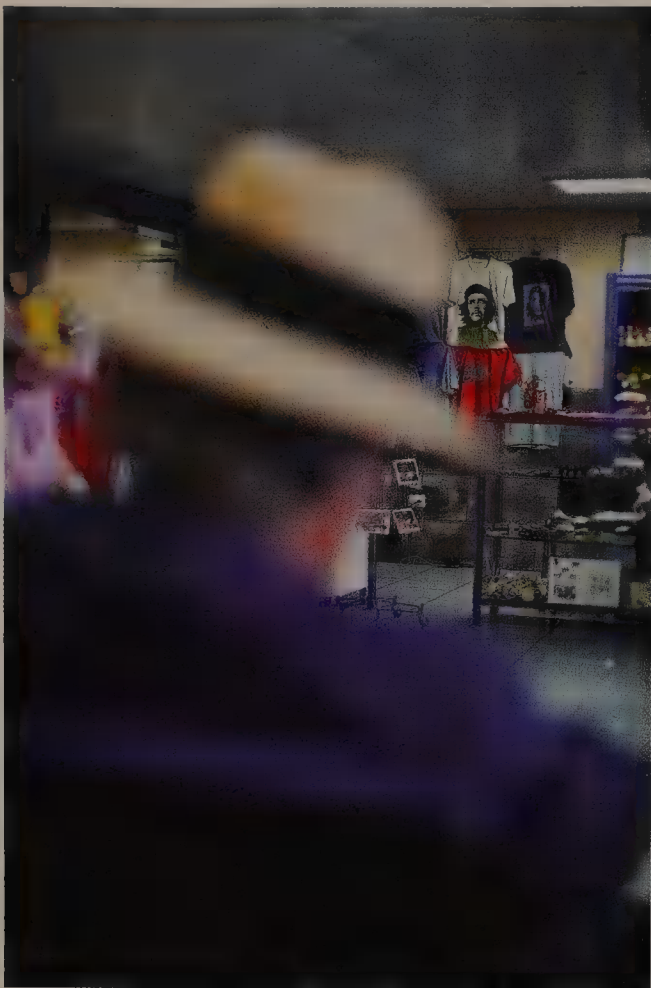




Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu, Nepal, by Brian Sokol. Sokol photographed the airport on April 21 (top) and after the May 12 earthquake (center)  
Abu Dhabi International Airport, United Arab Emirates, by Stanley Greene/NOOR Images



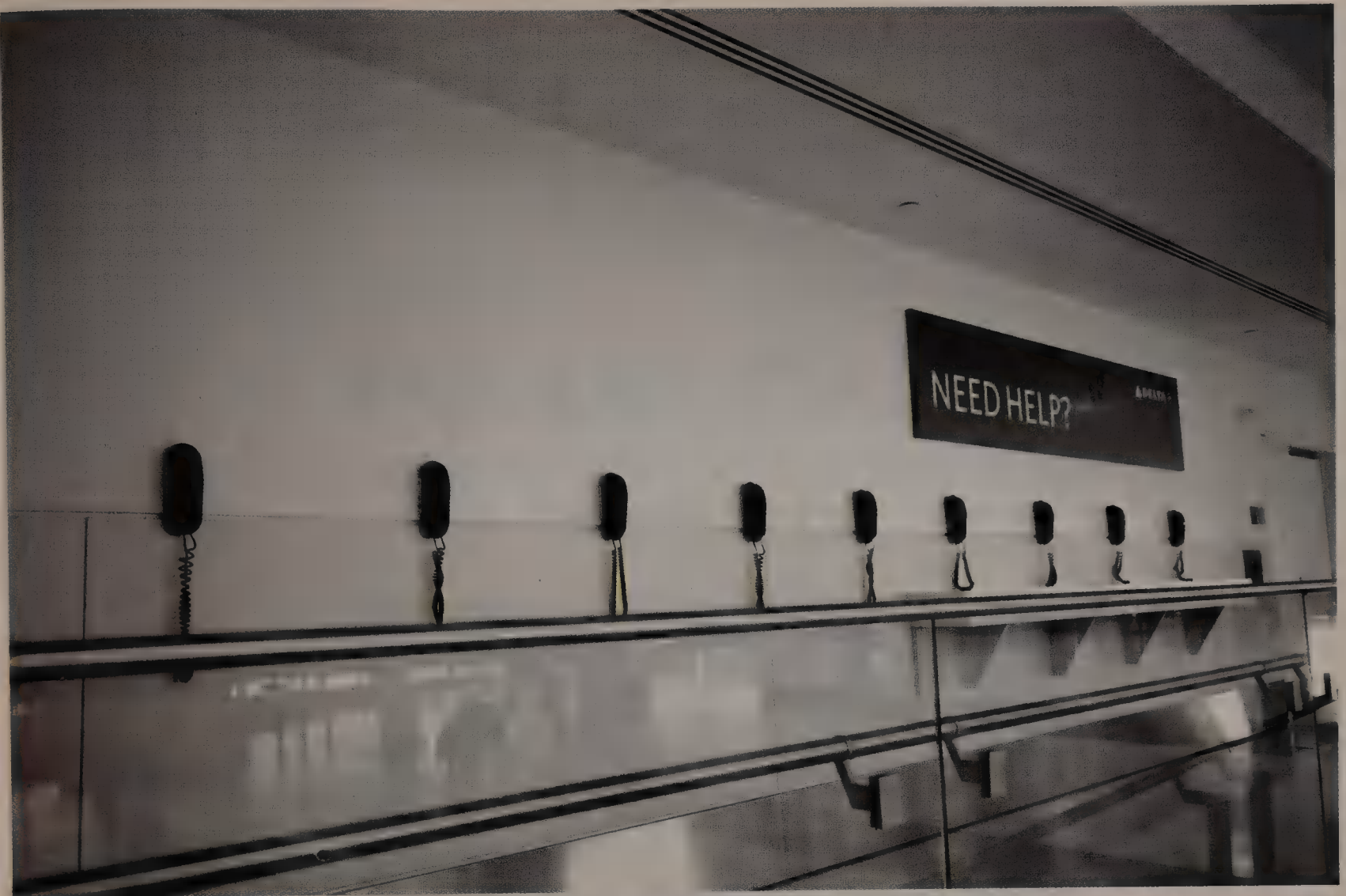
Erbil International Airport, Iraq, by Guy Martin  
Murtala Muhammed International Airport, Lagos, Nigeria, by Samuel James



This page: José Martí International Airport, Havana, by Keith Carter  
 Barcelona-El Prat Airport, Spain, by Jason Fulford  
 Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport, China, by Zhang Kechun  
 Opposite page: Tokyo Haneda Airport, by Charlotte Dumas







# THE SPEAKEASY

A week of stand-up in Hollywood's toughest room

By Dave Madden

**M**arty's comedy club sits at one end of a strip mall on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, above a cleaner's and a take-out pizzeria. The entrance is up a side street and easy to miss. In the club, color eight-by-tens of past performers line the walls. Many of these photographs suffer from red-eye; some of the faces have penises drawn on them. On a low countertop near the front door, a clipboard holds a sign-up sheet with the heading FUNNY AND FUNNY LOOKING. For five dollars, a stand-up hopeful can perform a set in Marty's main area, which resembles an abandoned factory showroom: bare concrete floor, sparse track lighting, and a dozen or so seats, most of them rolling desk chairs. Though the walls are painted a bright cherry red, the place has little cheer. The headrests of two beige easy chairs, which sit in front of the stage, are stained black from the oily scalps of

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nervous comics. At one end of the room, the stage rises six inches off the floor, with a haphazard drum kit in one corner, a wheeled wooden throne in the other, a metal stool between them, and a microphone stand in front. A decal on the back wall, with text in Comic Sans, reads MARTY'S. Next to it is a poster-size sketch of the club's owner, Marty Foster.

There's no bar at Marty's and no kitchen. The club is open six evenings a week, from five to eleven o'clock. The only thing to do there is to watch open-mic stand-up com-

edy or get onstage and perform it.

I discovered Marty's while I was visiting Los Angeles in the summer of 2012. I was seeking to understand how stand-up, of which I'd been a lifelong fan, had shifted over the past decade from something to laugh at to something to think and argue about. People I knew who had never seemed interested were suddenly talking about comedy albums and asking whether I watched *Louie*. Los Angeles was where the best stand-up in

the country was happening, thanks to legendary clubs like the Comedy Store and the Improv, as well as newer venues like the UCB Theatre. Back home in Tuscaloosa, I'd often visited the Green Bar, which twice a month let an unvarying cast of drinkers take the stage to tell an unvarying selection of off-color jokes to whatever friends they'd managed to wrangle through Facebook. Though there was something dispiriting about the open mic's lack of potential—no one's career was going anywhere unless they left town—I kept returning to the Green

Bar in the hope that I might figure out what made stand-up work. In particular, I thought I could learn something by watching people bomb. "Failure is not mere failure," John Dewey wrote. "It is instructive."

I went to L.A. to watch comedians fail at a higher level, and, I hoped, to catch a few serious performers trying out new material between gigs. After I arrived, I googled "los angeles open mic comedy" and found a listing for Marty's. The club was close to where I was staying, and it was open, so around five o'clock that evening I decided to check it out. A bald man, thin and tan with a gray goatee, introduced himself when I entered. This was Marty Foster. He asked my name and told me to put it on the list. I told him that I only wanted to watch, and he said that I still had to pay the five dollars. I took a chair close enough to the door to allow for a quick exit. The show soon started, with Foster playing host, telling jokes between comics, doing his best to warm up the five or six people in the audience. "Got Robbie and Joe over here. You know, Robbie started masturbating when he was in middle school. Joe waited until he got home." The five comics I saw perform that evening spent most of their time onstage complaining about how hard it was to be single in Los Angeles. None of them told anything that could strictly be considered a joke. Forty-five minutes in, a middle-aged man with wild, curly hair got up and started shouting about politics. That's when I decided it was time to leave.

For months after my visit to Marty's, I couldn't stop thinking about the club. No other comedy venue I knew devoted so much time to open-mic stand-up. Most reserved one or at best two nights a week for comics. Other nights they opted for a band or a DJ—anything that might draw an actual crowd. Marty's mic is open thirty-six hours a week and rarely, if ever, draws a significant crowd. It was hard to imagine how beginning comics could develop in such a space. In order to understand how Marty's could survive as an institution, I returned a year after my first visit

to spend a week at what was sure to be the world's bleakest comedy club.

At five o'clock on a Sunday, the first night of my sit-in at Marty's, Foster greeted me with a box of trash bags in his hand. I followed him from can to can as he told me about the club. "I like to think of Marty's as a comedy gym, where people can come in and practice their material," he said. We walked past the Bunker, a closed room that held a second stage, and stepped onto an empty patio where plastic deck chairs surrounded a few concrete pavers that constituted a third stage. The Bunker and the patio allowed comics to perform several times a night without having to wait to be called back to the main stage. Unlike open mics at other clubs, which might give comics five minutes, Marty's usually offered at least ten. "One guy went for an hour and fifteen," Foster said. "There was no one else waiting to go."

Foster is sixty years old. He started doing comedy in the fall of 2008, after he sat in on a friend's stand-up class. He began hitting the open-mic circuit in L.A., often performing several nights a week, and landed his first hosting gig in 2009, at the Ha Ha Cafe in North Hollywood. He lost the job five months later, after he introduced Jack Assadourian, the club's owner, as "Jack Ass." "I was spoiled," Foster said. "Up five nights a week at the club, bringing up maybe twenty to twenty-five people, being able to do my one-liners between each one. I couldn't now go chasing around town to do three minutes."

Before Marty's, Foster had spent his days managing the Apex Mobile Legal Copy Document Production & X-Ray Duplicating Service, a company he founded in 1976. (He came up with the name to optimize his yellow-pages placement.) In the Nineties, Foster had seventeen employees. By 2010, he had two: one guy who prepared subpoenas and another who served them. He began thinking about opening his own comedy club. "I looked around and saw lots of empty desks," he said. He pulled up Apex's carpet,

cleared out the office supplies, and used the metal shelving to build the main stage. Foster opened the club on Valentine's Day of 2010. He got upstart comics to host by waiving their entrance fee. By the time I visited, Foster had mostly taken over the club's hosting duties. "Rather than me running around all over town trying to be seen," he told me, "I think of my club as the right place for when the right time comes along."

When I'd arrived at the club, there had been just one other person waiting for the show. Now three more comics had dropped in. I took a seat near the door. A man named Joe, in track pants and a mismatched jacket, launched into his set. "War!" he shouted. "What it is? North Korea. South Korea." Joe then delivered twenty minutes of confusion about women that drew laughs only from himself.

"I blame the Boston bombings on the hairy nipples of the gay and lesbian, overweight, black, and Jewish midget pornographers of Islam," said a guy with stringy hair who was dressed all in black. "Because I'm a racist, sizeist, sexist, erotophobic, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, misanthropic, religiously bigoted homophobe." The guy told the joke again, this time explaining why it was funny. No one laughed. Then he plugged in his iPod. Country music filled the room. He stepped back to the mic and began singing the joke in a shaky voice. Most of us stared into our laps. His set ended when the song did.

In the nearly forty hours I spent at Marty's that week, the main room never held more than twelve people. The audience was almost exclusively comedians, many of whom fiddled with their phones or tablets during one another's sets. It's not easy to bring such a crowd to laughter. Even so, the comics seemed unwilling or possibly unable to tell jokes in the standard setup-punch line format. Their sets often sounded less like comedy than like the stories of everyday tragedy a person might hear in an A.A. meeting. One man talked about serving time in prison and barely

avoiding being raped by a cell-mate. Another described being flamed on a Facebook page for stand-ups in Orange County. Incredulity often took the place of punch lines. “I saw a guy, he took a fucking typewriter to a coffee shop,” shouted one young comic. “Who the fuck does this?” Other comics got so particular that I wasn’t sure how to react. “I found a snail in my shower,” a sleepy-eyed stoner yelled at us late one night. “Like, what the fuck? How? How did it penetrate?”

Foster, for his part, told real jokes. (“I was feeling a little randy earlier, and then he told his parents.”) So did a short strawberry-blond woman named Mae Victoria. When she went up, around ten-thirty on my first night, I recognized her from one of the portraits that hung above Foster’s easy chair at the front of the room. In the photo, she is standing behind the mic topless. “A couple of years ago, when the recession hit, a lot of people got a second job, or they went back to school, or they moved back in with their parents,” Mae Victoria said. “Well, I did pornographic movies. I’ve had sex with so many men, my bed is now a legitimate tax deduction. I’ve had more wangs inside me than a casino during a pai gow tournament.” Her set was full of one-liners, but she got no better or worse reception than the ranters she followed. I began to wonder whether Marty’s was immune to laughter. How did people know when they’d succeeded? Or failed? Nobody was booed all night; instead of heckling, the audience often chatted back to the comedians.

“When you ask a lady her definition of ‘mature’ she’s all, ‘You know, having a house and getting married and having kids,’” said a comedian named Chuck on Sunday night. “How the fuck is that mature?”

Jill, our host for the evening, interrupted him. “Well, it’s *supposed* to be mature.” She was a thin, raspy-voiced woman and wore silver lamé shorts. “You’re supposed to pay your bills on time. You’re supposed to not have your water turned off.”



Chuck, derailed, looked at her helplessly. “It’s a sore subject,” she said.

**B**etween sets at Marty’s the comics stood around and talked shop. On Monday evening a college-aged kid named Alex asked the room for advice about a joke. “I wrote this bit a year and a half ago, about how I take the bus,” he said. “Like, the one thing I never understood is, why do homeless people beg for money on the bus? Isn’t everyone who rides a bus almost as broke as they are? Anytime I’m sitting on a bus and a homeless guy comes up and says, ‘Can I have a dollar?’ I say, ‘Dude, I’m like one dollar away from being you.’” But earlier that day he’d come across a similar joke in a comedy special by Willie Barcena, which he played for us on his phone:

I hate when bums come up to me:  
“Hey, you got change? You got change?”  
Yeah, fuck, I got change. It’s mine. You  
know what keeps me from being you?  
It’s my change.

“I might have to just cut it,” Alex said of his version, but he was reluctant. He had an audition coming up for which he needed a clean five minutes, and it was one of his few clean jokes. “I feel like I’m safe, but I don’t ever want to be accused—Marty, you know me. I would never steal someone’s joke.”

“You have it in a different setting,” Foster said. “I think it’s fine.”

I took advantage of the lull and approached the stage. I’d persuaded Foster to let me hang around his club and pester his clientele for a week by making a deal with him. “I will work with you on this article,” he’d emailed me, “on the condition that you take your turn each night on stage.” Perhaps he wanted to ensure I’d give the club fair and sincere coverage, or maybe he was after my five-dollar fee. In the end, I haggled him down to two nights—and allowed for the possibility of a third. The thought of performing terrified me. I liked to think that I could be funny among friends or in front of a classroom, but I didn’t know the

first thing about entertaining a group of strangers who were expecting comedy. For weeks I’d started each day writing jokes, which I attempted to tailor to my audience of would-be comics. Eventually I built my set up to six minutes.

“I’d ask how everyone’s doing tonight, but I already know: you’re all bombing,” I said. Foster snickered, but no one else made a sound. “I haven’t been subjected to this much bad stand-up since my down-low fling with Carlos Mencia.” Nothing. I warned the three people in the audience that Foster had encouraged me to fill five minutes. “Lucky for you, it’s all dick jokes,” I said. No reaction. My only real laugh came from a joke about how, back in Alabama, sex toys were illegal: “You can vote a dildo into office but you can’t buy one for the bedroom.” I was so thrown by the positive response that I messed up the ending: “Of course as they say, uh. Anytime—or, uh ... how does that one go?” My crowd listened patiently. “Oh: Whenever dildos are outlawed, only outlaws will have dildos.” Nobody laughed.

I knew enough to save for the end of my set what I could only with the greatest generosity call my killer material, but each time I got to my final punch lines I heard nothing. On-stage, speaking the lines I’d memorized, I could picture myself pacing around my hotel room, pausing for laughs at each kicker. Writing and honing that material had taken me

two weeks. My set lasted six minutes and ten seconds. I read somewhere that no joke is funny until it gets a laugh in front of an audience. By that standard, I spent two weeks writing a single funny dildo joke.

**T**he stand-up open mic dates to the 1960s, when Greenwich Village nightclubs held “hootenanny nights” at which attendees could tell a few jokes or sing a song or two. Bob Dylan was a regular at Cafe Wha? on MacDougal Street, along with Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor. Jimmy Walker and Gilbert Gottfried were early performers at the Bitter End, on Bleecker Street. By the 1970s, other clubs around the city—most famously the Improvisation and Catch a Rising Star—had begun devoting time to comedy. In *Comedy at the Edge*, an exhaustive history of 1970s New York stand-up, Richard Zoglin writes that the comedian David Brenner was sitting in one afternoon while Rick Newman, Catch’s founder, auditioned new acts. After enduring a “parade of bad singers and amateurish comedians,” Zoglin says, Brenner suggested that Newman move the auditions to a slow night and charge admission. Eventually, Catch’s open mic, on Monday nights, became its second-busiest event of the week.

In 1972, Johnny Carson relocated *The Tonight Show* from Manhattan to Burbank, California, which sparked an exodus of New York comedians to the West Coast. Mitzi Shore’s Comedy Store, in West Hollywood, opened that year, and Budd Friedman, the founder of the Improv, opened a club on Melrose Avenue in 1975. David Letterman did a set at the Comedy Store’s open mic on his first Monday night in Los Angeles, and he became an instant regular.

These days, the stakes are much lower: open mics rarely attract star performers, and the material is usually very rough. One of the only remaining L.A. open mics that still draws a robust crowd of tourists and civilians can be found at the Laugh Factory, a venue that looks more like

a cinema palace than a comedy warehouse, with Art Deco features, wood paneling, and a thrust stage. It’s not uncommon for the club to hire regular performers from its weekly open mic. On Tuesday evening, I played hooky from Marty’s and headed down Sunset Boulevard to watch the show with Jamie Masada, the owner of the Laugh Factory. Though many of the comics got big laughs from the audience, Masada, who sat in the back of the room, looking boyish in a jacket and jeans, rarely broke his close-lipped smile. “I just moved to West Hollywood,” said a seventeen-year-old blond guy who calls himself the Justin Bieber of comedy, “and I wasn’t ready for all the differences. This is the gayest place on earth. I even saw a gay stop sign, it had like ten o’s.” The audience roared.

Door charge for the show was twenty bucks, and the Laugh Factory enforced its two-drink minimum, which might help explain why everyone was killing. “I recently tried this little local place,” the last guy of the night said. “Tiny little hole in the wall. Not sure if you guys have heard of it—it’s called McDonald’s.” Even

warning light. I saw twenty comics that night. Not all of them were funny, but each told actual jokes. The hour flew by.

Just before eight, Harvey Dunn, the club’s venerable emcee, invited the show’s comics to a VIP lounge upstairs to discuss their sets with Masada. This was what everyone was waiting for—many had stood in line for several hours to get their name on the list, then waited several days to perform. Most open mics let comics take the stage within an hour; the Laugh Factory makes performers wait a week. It’s great advertising for the club—comics stand outside all day, snaking their way down the block, for a chance at the sign-up sheet. One guy I talked to had taken the day off work.

I asked Masada what he looked for in a performer. He wanted someone with good timing and material, he told me, who was also “huggable.” Comics should have confidence, he added. They should tell a story. They should give details. He told a kid named Patrick to practice his set forty more times around town before returning for another try at the Laugh Factory.

Every performer was hoping for a showcase: a six-to-ten-minute, cuss-all-you-want set at the end of the open mic that was the first step to becoming a paid regular. “Damon Wayans, Dane Cook, they all came in to the open mic,” Masada told me. At the end of the night, he gave out five showcases, three of which went to comics who’d been signed up by the club’s management. Ringers, in other words, who got on the bill not by waiting outside but because of their reputations. It would take those five comics several months before they got their showcases. These days, a Letterman who kills his first night can’t expect to start booking shows the following week.

Los Angeles is filled with Lettermans. And the Internet has given national exposure to plenty of comics who are not particularly huggable and don’t tell stories onstage—comedians such as Maria Bamford, James Adomian, and Hari Kondabolu, who have found audiences through



this got more laughs than anything I’d heard at Marty’s. The club’s restrictions also probably helped. No swearing was allowed, and sets were limited to three minutes. When a comedian had thirty seconds left, Masada would flip a switch on the wall above his head to activate a red

podcasts, Twitter, and YouTube, independent of any club's endorsement. Gatekeepers like the Laugh Factory have dropped in status everywhere, and yet each week there's no shortage of fresh faces waiting their turn to hear what Jamie Masada thinks.

A few hours later, I was back at Marty's, listening to the rantings of a blue-eyed cherub in a fedora. "You know, in America, we can't get over the sex thing. It's like, if people would just fuck what they want to fuck, except I dunno—kids maybe? That would be a problem. I guess with the parents. But not the *kids*. I didn't complain. People are like, 'Oh, I was molested.' I'm like, 'Oh, I was too. It didn't hurt!' They're like, 'Oh, that's so awful.' No, it's not! You know what's awful? Feeling sorry for yourself, that's what's fucking awful. What the fuck? Who died and gave us all a fucking excuse to have a god-damned disability? Who the fuck did this? George Bush? Yes. George fucking Bush gave us the excuse to have Americans with disabilities. To be an American you've got to have a disability. And guess what: it's an act."

Foster announced my next attempt at Marty's as the second set I'd ever done. This got me some applause. But it also upended the foundation of my third joke. "This is, yeah, my second time doing stand-up," I said, ten seconds in. "So this whole week I—that's the thing: this next joke is about the first time. Forget it: this is my *first* time doing stand-up. If it's anything like, uh ... like my *last* first time, you're all pregnant."

No laughs.

The flaw in this joke, Foster told me later, was that it was premised on something the audience knew to be false. "Also, insulting your audience as your first line is not a good idea." He was referring to my "you're all bombing" opener, which had been doubly bad because, out of fear, I'd gone up so early that nobody had had the chance to bomb. Foster believed that comedy was born of a series of "blown images"—a joke's setup prepared an image that the

punch line either inverted or subverted. He presented an alternative opener: "Tonight I have a wonderful audience of some very fine comics. I've seen you perform tonight; I guess it's an off night." This created an image, acknowledging a shared experience, then blew it up.

Foster was giving me license to scrap my material, which I appreciated, because I hated my material. In everyday life, I mumble and I talk too fast. I often struggle to make myself understood and have always looked to writing as a refuge. But under the pressure to be funny I'd turned to topics I didn't really care about. Foster told me that a successful performance depended on revealing a relatable personality. My jokes had revealed nothing.

Most of the other comedians at Marty's revealed everything. "I'm six foot six, three hundred and ten pounds, never lost a fight I was in," said a comic named Liam one night on the patio, a stage, I'd discovered, that was more relaxed and often populated by smokers and stoners. "But I'm terrified of women. Women don't understand, I can do here," he said, pulling his bear arms in close around his chest. "I can hug you. But you want me to know how to text."

This got a few chuckles from the audience, but then again, half of these

"You know when you go 'I can do here?'" Paul said. "You should then say, 'But you want me to know you over there.'" He held his arms outward, blowing Liam's image of a tight embrace.

Liam backed up and tried the joke again. "Women don't understand, I'm genetically coded to know you here. If you let me hug you, you'll realize how nice I am. But you want me to deal with you there. Just out of reach. Even Kareem Abdul-Jabbar couldn't get to where you want me to be. And then, in between us, there's a minefield of texts that I have to get exactly right."

"I think you can even cut out the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar thing," Paul said. "The simpler, the better."

"Yeah. I can deal with you here, when you're in my arms hugging me. But I can't deal with you when you're over there, and there's a minefield of texts between us."

"That's fucking hilarious," Paul said, nodding solemnly.

Scenes like this happened nearly every night. Marty's was a place where people didn't deliver material so much as find it, usually by riffing on a topic until they got an impromptu laugh, or, if that didn't happen, hitting the subject from another angle. Often the audience responded with workshop critique. "Mics like this one, they don't welcome *material*," a comic named Rishi Arya told me. "It's not spontaneous." Earlier in the night I'd seen Arya run two sets within an hour, and both were so relaxed and natural I'd felt almost voyeuristic watching him. There'd been no jokes, no material, but I remembered laughing, the way I remember laughing during a night of beers with friends. "You're uncomfortable when you're riffing," Arya said. "That's why a lot of comics don't do it. They have their jokes to protect them."

This helped me realize, four days into my open-mic debauch, what had made my sets so disappointing: I hadn't talked to my audience, I'd recited at them. My jokes certainly weren't funny, but as jokes they weren't any worse than anybody



people were visibly high. Liam continued his bit until a guy named Paul interrupted from the corner.

else's. What made them fail was my delivery: I'd made no attempt to connect with the audience. I had generated none of the intimacy, and taken on none of the risk, that I always appreciate when I'm watching comedy. Every good comic walks a tightrope of vulnerability, whereas I had stayed safely on the platform, with my puns and my mock belligerence, wondering at my lack of applause.

To test whether Marty's really was inhospitable to laughter, I invited a known comedic quantity, Josh Fadem, to try out a set one afternoon at the club. Fadem, who's been acting and performing stand-up in L.A. for more than a decade (his most notable role was playing Liz Lemon's pubescent agent on *30 Rock*), had never heard of Marty's. When he took the stage, he opened with an improvised bit about the characters in *Django Unchained*. He did impressions of Christoph Waltz and Jamie Foxx that had me, Foster, two regulars, and the night's devastatingly unfunny host howling. But then Fadem's set started to go downhill. He told a nearly laughless story about finding a *Hustler* as a kid. He tried some dick jokes ("So they say I'm a real testicle in the sack"). Then he began flipping through his phone. After a long silence, he did a bit about growing up Jewish in Oklahoma. He canned the bit midway through and tried some one-liners. ("Ever notice every time you drink asparagus pee it makes your breath smell funny?") He finished the set with older, worked material. Some of this got laughs, some of it didn't.

"It wasn't the most awesome performance, but it also wasn't too foreign to me," Fadem told me later. "I thought it was strange that there were no chairs," he added.

He'd never been to a club that looked quite like Marty's.

"It felt like a dark L.A. sort of thing," he said, "something you do when you're new to L.A. You bust your ass in places like that. The photographs on the wall, the bad comedians." But, he said, "I think

that's the point of an open mic: it's not supposed to be good."

A good open mic, like the one at the Laugh Factory, would attract a paying crowd, which would put pressure on the comics to get laughs, thereby undermining the opportunity to improve rough material. The squalor of Marty's all but guaranteed that the off-the-street, casual comedy fan would stay away. This, paradoxically, made it more valuable to comedians. Most of Marty's performers were amateurs, but even seasoned comics would occasionally stop by to test out their acts.



"A guy like Louis C.K., his open mic would be a packed show of comics where he could just drop in," said Sammy Obeid, a professional touring comedian whom I saw perform on two nights at Marty's. "But what if you don't have that?" Like Marty, Chris Rock has referred to comedy clubs as gyms, but for greener comics, who have fewer chances to perform in front of an audience, the stakes at a club show are higher. "With Marty's, it's so simple," Obeid said. "Costs five dollars, but I've come here before and done like seven sets in one night." Both nights I saw Obeid perform at Marty's, he'd run the same tight set. The jokes were punchy, pristine, and delivered with the kind of extemporaneity that makes good stand-up a wonder to watch. "I'm Palestinian but my

roommate is Jewish, so we always fight over where his room starts and mine ends," he said. "He pays more rent, but I've been there longer."

Fadem told me that he had hosted a weekly seven-comedian show at a Ramada in Los Angeles. On his anniversary show, he took all seven slots for himself, running the same set seven times in a row. Sometimes he repeated himself joke for joke, or mixed one joke's setup with another's punch line, or even told the jokes as different characters. "For the rest of the week I was so sharp," Fadem said. "There's something about running yourself through the ringer for seven different shows, because if you do it that many times, you're likely to encounter and be ready for every single problem you can experience during a stand-up set."

Marty's has also provided a humble start for the children of several famous comedians— aspiring comics who knew they weren't yet ready for the clubs that booked their parents. Damon Wayans Jr. is a regular, Foster told me. He and his uncle Marlon were the first to perform in the bunker when it opened in 2011, and Marlon's portrait was one of the many hung up in the vestibule. The wooden throne on the main stage was donated by Lucas Dick, son of

Andy, who won it at an open-mic night held at a now-defunct restaurant called Sushi Kingz. "I don't know of any famous person that can tell an audience to laugh at their son," Albert Brooks—son of a radio comedian—once said. So here was Marty's, open seven days a week, for the children of stars to see whether they could generate laughs on their own. "It's gratifying to me," Foster said about his regulars. "It makes me feel good to see that people do take it seriously. They come regularly, they're progressing in their careers, and a lot of times thanking me and giving me credit."

On my first night at Marty's, it was nearly midnight by the time all the comics had gotten their fill of the main stage. The last to perform was a young guy with a pompadour

and thick-framed glasses. "That's Andrew Dice Clay's kid," Foster said. Andrew Dice Clay's kid showed up almost every night that week. He hustled between the patio and the Bunker, from which raucous shouts and laughter could often be heard through the closed door. I'd avoided the room out of some unspecified fear, but one night I mustered the courage to follow Clay's kid inside, and I watched him run a set for two people who were draped across plush vinyl sofas in a room just big enough to park a Yaris. He was twenty-two, tall and lanky, lived with his father in the Valley, and performed under his given name, Max Silverstein. His act was quiet, goofy, and self-deprecating—nothing like his dad's horny bluster. "I'm still really learning how to do comedy," Silverstein told me. "I could probably walk into certain clubs and go, you know, 'Yo, my dad's Andrew Dice Clay, get me on right now,' and it would probably work. I'd get up there. But if I eat shit, I'm fucking done."

Stand-up, Silverstein said, "really is a personal journey. Finding yourself onstage, knowing who you are, being comfortable with yourself." His dad, he said, "can give me all the tips in the world, but at the end of the day I just have to go do it, fail or do good, and learn from that." Marty's was an ideal place for him to practice, and not only because of the amount of stage time he could rack up. "There's no pressure whatsoever," he said. "Even if there's one person listening, it gives you the practice of just being able to say the sentences out loud into a microphone."

Couldn't he do that at home?

"I could, but I also like to come here because I think it's a great hangout," he said. "It's a clubhouse for open-mic comedians."

I saved my last set at Marty's for my final night in L.A. Taking Foster and Arya's advice into account, I decided to reveal something of myself to the audience. I'd assumed that the joke about my fling with Carlos Mencia had made it clear that I was gay, but I was wrong. "I

didn't know," Foster said when I told him one night. (He'd spent the week telling tremendously offensive gay jokes, and, to his credit, he didn't stop.) "You just revealed that to me. That's good. This is what we're striving for."

I took the stage late, right after a homeless guy who, midway through his set, told a story about having to walk an old man down the street. "He took my hand," he said. "I felt like a faggot." The tone of the evening was strange. Foster had taken the night off, and there was a weird lawlessness about the place. No women had shown up yet. Most of the guys were smoking pot on the patio, where they'd just finished taping the club's first podcast. "'Female' and 'comic' do not go in the same sentence," one of them said during the taping. I couldn't imagine a less appropriate audience for my material, which consisted of jokes on precisely three topics: West Hollywood, straight porn versus gay porn, and transmale top surgery.

"You guys talk a lot about watching porn," I said. "Lots of porn jokes this week, and I'm like, 'Yeah, me too.'"

A stoned guy in the corner gave me my first laugh. It would also be my last. I kept going, scriptless and afraid. I knew that I wanted to talk about the way muscle-bears often punch each other in the chest in porn, but I didn't know how to make it funny.

"I like big dudes," I said. "Like big hairy dudes? Those types?"

"You like bears," two guys shouted back in unison.

"Wow," I said. "You all know the lingo."

They looked bored. I realized that while chest-punching might be a staple of man-on-man porn, it might not be common in female-on-female porn. "I don't know if two women punch each other in the tit," I said, "as a way to, like, measure the niceness of it? I don't think that happens. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"I've never seen it," said the long-haired man who sang his jokes my first night at the club.

"I imagine not," I said. It was like we were just having a conver-

sation, the five of us in the room. Was it stand-up? No. Or maybe it was. I felt better than I had all week. I wasn't telling jokes, and nobody was laughing, but I was talking into a microphone and people were listening. Was that stand-up? Or was it performance art? My set lasted fifteen minutes, but it felt like five.

Later, I wondered what had made the set so enjoyable. In a one-man show, no matter how autobiographical, there's a pose, a theatrical affectation. Even improv—a form of comedy that trades in spontaneity and instinct—requires an audience to suspend its disbelief. Stand-up comedy, which is often scripted and timed, requires even more suspension. But a real laugh can't be faked. This is the magic of stand-up: we submit ourselves to a performer and hope to be given an experience of spontaneous emotion. Successful comedians have learned to overcome or to conceal the unease inherent in performing, so that we can experience their acts as something natural and true. I wasn't able to accomplish this, but my last night onstage I'd come close. A place like Marty's gives comedians the chance to work through their discomfort—in public and over many hours—by racking up stage time. They get used to being watched, and they bomb, and bomb again.

"You know who Mitzi Shore is?" a Marty's regular named Sam Stevens asked me one night at the club. "I don't think he's gonna be the equivalent of Mitzi Shore, but Marty will be a known figure that certain comedians came up through, because the cool thing about Marty is that he guides us by listening. He listens and appreciates, which is a weird quality that most people don't have."

Stevens carried on this conversation as he dawdled onstage before beginning his set. It was the most revealing I'd heard anybody get when talking about the place. As Stevens spoke, Foster sat in his easy chair at the front of the room, smiling under a wall of stand-up devotees, each of whom he'd photographed himself. ■

# FUGUE STATE

The struggle for national identity in wartime Ukraine

By Sarah A. Topol

Like just about every building, street, town, and city in Ukraine, the prison on Lontskoho Street in Lviv has changed hands many times during the past century. It was successively claimed by the Hapsburgs, the Poles, the Russians, the Nazis, and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Under the auspices of an independent Ukraine, the building is now appropriately known as the National Memorial Museum Dedicated to Victims of Occupational Regimes.

When I set out to visit the museum on a foggy morning last winter, the structure was hard to find: it blends innocuously into its baroque surroundings. Inside, it was freezing, and my soft-spoken guide, with her angular bob and puffy overcoat, led me down a hallway of corroding red metal doors, which opened into cells the size of large closets. The Polish government, she explained, had completed the prison in 1923 to house “antistate elements.” The cells were soon crammed with members of the nascent Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (O.U.N.), which fought for independence from Polish control and specialized in political assassination.

Sarah A. Topol’s most recent article for Harper’s Magazine, “Guns and Poses,” appeared in the December 2014 issue. Her work on this article was supported by a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

The history that followed was, like all Ukrainian history, intensely confusing. Shortly before the Poles completed the prison, the eastern half of Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union, which led the O.U.N., in the name of na-

Lviv, which was still being defended by remnants of the Polish army. Eventually the Nazis fell back and ceded the city to the Red Army.

On June 23, 1941, with the Nazis on their doorstep again, Soviet prison officials received an order to execute all the inmates, who might well fight for the Germans should they be liberated. One at a time, the prisoners were brought into special cells with sloping floors and shot at close range. A bucket of water washed the blood down the drain, and then the next victim was marched in. Their first names, patronymics, last names, and birthdays were methodically ticked off in red pencil. Over five days, at

least 1,680 prisoners were slaughtered, and when the Soviets retreated, on June 29, they left the bodies in the basement for the Germans to find.

After the Nazis discovered the bodies, they ordered local Jews to carry the corpses outside the prison for identification, while spreading the word that the Jews themselves had committed the slaughter. A pogrom erupted on Lontskoho Street and spread throughout the city, leaving thousands of Jews dead.

My guide led me to an exhibit that showed photographs of people carrying the corpses. She made no mention of the Jews. “Who took the bodies outside?” I asked her.



tional sovereignty, to add the Russians to their list of enemies. The group’s antagonism only increased in the wake of a Soviet-devised famine known as the Holodomor, which killed millions of Ukrainian peasants during the early 1930s.<sup>1</sup> In 1939, when Germany and the U.S.S.R. divided Poland between them, the two nations fought for control of

<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to enforce collective farming in 1932, Soviet officials expropriated grain from unwilling peasants and prevented them from traveling elsewhere in search of food, effectively starving them into submission. Across Ukraine, as well as parts of Russia and Kazakhstan, millions died: parents ate their children, and children ate their parents. Holodomor literally means “death by hunger.”

"We are not sure, because of different sources, so I don't know," she said. "Perhaps the director will answer this question."

Ruslan Zabily, the museum's director, proved no less evasive. Zabily, a small bespectacled man in a bulky woolen sweater, took me to a restaurant around the corner. At first he dodged the issue, noting that there was plenty of competition for the most horrific slaughter in modern Ukrainian history. How could a five-year-old museum cover all the candidates? Then he suggested that the pogrom may not have taken place in front of the prison, that it might be traced to apartment buildings in the city center. And perhaps there was no organized pogrom at all, perhaps the Jews had simply been attacked by marginal elements of society: criminals, Germans, Poles, maybe some Ukrainians. Maybe even other Jews.

"We don't have a scientific basis for this," he said. "When we have all the documents, there won't be questions and there won't be speculation."

Later, in Kiev, I asked Josef Zissels, the chairman of the General Council of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, about the tour. His initial response was dismissive. "That museum? Who goes there? We create our own museums!" he said. "We have one hundred Jewish projects. Education, social support, science, all nearby here. That's where Jewish history is being created."

But I was less concerned with the specific specter of anti-Semitism than with what this omission suggested about Ukraine's approach to its fractured past. I asked Zissels the same question I asked nearly everybody I encountered in Ukraine. Why can't there be one museum, one place of memory, where the nation considers its entire history—victims and perpetrators alike, with all the corresponding shades of gray?

"Give us three hundred years," he said.

I had not really come to Ukraine to seek out historical truths. What interested me was the way in which Ukrainians interpreted their own history and identity following the collapse of the U.S.S.R.—especially in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which fanned separatist flames throughout the eastern part of the coun-



try. Within months, war broke out between the Ukrainian army and two self-proclaimed secessionist republics in Donetsk and Lugansk. In September came the first of many truces, which both parties have been quick to violate. When I was there last winter, the shelling and the skirmishes continued, while the West upbraided Russia for its (unofficial) connivance in the conflict.

Moscow would have people believe that the war was instigated by a fascist junta in Kiev, bent on oppressing ethnic Russians. Meanwhile, the new government in Kiev maintains that local criminals and terrorists have locked arms with Putin's jackbooted invaders. My question wasn't which side fired the first shot but how the status quo unraveled with such astonishing speed. How can a nation lose two of its major cities to separatists overnight? If every group in Ukraine builds its own museums and publishes its own history books, why would anyone feel loyalty to the center?

Ukraine did not exist autonomously within its current borders until 1991. When the U.S.S.R. disintegrated, the newly independent nation needed patriotic myths to teach its schoolchildren—a complicated matter even in a less frangible society. At first, many of these stories defined the country in opposition to Russia. Historians quickly dredged up forgotten nationalistic episodes: for example, the Cossacks of central Ukraine who had refused to join the Russian Empire during the eighteenth century. In 2003, Ukraine's second president, Leonid Kuchma, published a book whose

title neatly summarized the national conversation. It was called *Ukraina—ne Rossiia: Ukraine Is Not Russia*.

After the Orange Revolution of 2005—a two-month-long pro-democracy demonstration that brought Viktor Yushchenko to power—this national mythologizing went into overdrive. Yushchenko bet heavily on Ukrainian identity. In 2006, he established the National Institute of Memory in Kiev, and directed historians to pore over Soviet archives (the ones the Russians hadn't destroyed or carted back to Moscow) in order to document the Holodomor. Scholars diligently classified the mass starvation as an act of genocide, on the grounds that it targeted the bread-producing class, which meant Ukrainians. Though most reputable historians estimate that 3.5 million people died, some put the death toll at 10 million—by counting the millions of Ukrainians who would have been born if the Soviets had not caused the artificial famine.

To balance the victim narrative, Ukraine also needed heroes. The government focused its adulation on the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (U.P.A.), the militant wing of the O.U.N. The U.P.A. collaborated with the Nazis to fight the Soviets, but turned against the Germans after realizing that they had no intention of making good on the promise of independent statehood. Yushchenko also propagated a cult of personality around Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian political activist and O.U.N. leader who was imprisoned by both the Poles and

the Germans before being assassinated by the KGB in 1959.

The problem with using anti-Russian sentiment as nation-building glue was that many in eastern Ukraine had strong ties to Russia. Even during the 1990s, before the rise of Yushchenko, this regional division was clear. During the so-called War of the Monuments, people in the west toppled statues of Lenin and erected busts of U.P.A. fighters and Taras Shevchenko, the national poet. In the east, Soviet monuments remained intact and celebrations of Soviet holidays drew large, noisy crowds.

The elevation of the U.P.A., which had pretty much ceased to exist by the mid-Fifties, was also problematic. After all, most Ukrainians had family who had served in the Red Army, which taught them that Bandera and the U.P.A. were murderers. Then there was the inconvenient fact that the U.P.A. had started as a fascist organization devoted to ethnic purity. Its members had killed their share of Poles and Jews, though they would soften their stance against minorities over time.

Not surprisingly, Yushchenko's nation-building strategy never completely panned out. It struck many as contrived and divisive. Ethnic Ukrainians as well as ethnic Russians complained to me that Yushchenko's efforts, for all their claims of inclusiveness, had rigorously excluded Soviet heroism and Soviet mythology—deeply personal matters to much of the population, especially in the east. “Yushchenko just said, ‘I’m Ukrainian, and I should be proud that I’m Ukrainian and you should be proud that you’re Ukrainian,’” the parliamentarian Mustafa Nayyem told me. “And that Ukrainian means *this*. A lot of people didn’t agree with him.”

The president and the Orange Revolution floundered, and Viktor Yanukovich, a strongman from the east whose candidacy Russia had approved, replaced him in 2010. At once Yanukovich began to roll back his predecessor's narrative. He downgraded the National Institute of Memory to a toothless government think tank and handed it over to a retrograde Communist. In public speeches, he referred to the Holodomor as a crime, a tragedy, an Armageddon—but not, pointedly, as a genocide. The courts stripped Bandera of his posthumous Hero of Ukraine

medal on the grounds that he had never been a citizen. Nationalist museums like the one in Lviv were targeted by security services, and Zabily was brought in for interrogation.

But national myths die hard—or not at all. For decades, identity, history, and language cleavages were used by Ukrainian politicians to divide the population and pander for votes. “It was much easier to say, ‘Our opponents, they don’t like the Russian language, so vote for me,’ than to say, ‘I want to make reforms,’” Nayyem explained.

In 2013 and 2014, protests broke out in Kiev’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti (“Independence Square”) when Yanukovich bowed to Russian pressure and halted plans for Ukraine to align economically with the European Union. During what came to be known as the Euromaidan protests, the red-and-black banner of the U.P.A. began to make frequent appearances. It was usually associated with the Right Sector, a nationalist organization whose adherents shouted U.P.A. slogans: “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” Meanwhile, in the east, pro-Russian protesters donned the Ribbon of St. George, a black-and-orange military decoration awarded to those who had fought in World War II, which the Russians call the Great Patriotic War. Some waved Russian flags, others pulled out their Soviet banners, which were looking less defunct by the day.

**L**viv, about fifty miles from the Polish border, is considered the bastion of Ukrainian nationalism. It was a natural setting, then, for Kryivka, a U.P.A.-themed restaurant in the city’s central square, where guests rap on a heavy unmarked door to get inside. When I knocked, a man in a paramilitary uniform peered through the slit and said: “Are you Russian?”

I shook my head. He swung open the door and offered me a shot of something amber-hued and vaguely sugary from a flask, his gun at the ready.

“It’s to prove you’re not Russian,” Yuro Nazaruk, the co-owner and creative director of the restaurant, explained to me inside. (Supposedly, this magic potion will cause a red star to appear on a Russian’s forehead.) Dressed in an orange fleece and cargo pants, with long

ginger hair and a pencil-thin goatee, Nazaruk looked more like a snowboarder than a successful businessman. Along with his partners, he runs twenty themed restaurants across the city, with outposts devoted to Freemasonry and to the S&M pioneer (and native son) Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

The restaurant was huge, with rooms built like bunkers, vaulted ceilings bathed in red light, and roving actors dressed to resemble U.P.A. militants. Over a plate of traditional Ukrainian appetizers—pig snouts and pig ears soaked in oil—Nazaruk told me that he wanted to create a living museum, not the boring kind where people are constantly shushed.

“The main idea is to make the first step toward people who have a negative attitude to this symbol of the U.P.A.,” he explained, which put me right in his target audience. Diners indifferent to the U.P.A. were free to ignore the posters and props and nationalist regalia. “You can just sit, drink beer, and eat Ukrainian food. But still, all these things, they are near you, and all these eyes of people in the photos—you cannot be against it.”

Nazaruk wanted to clarify what he regarded as an important distinction: the Soviets were invaders during World War II, while members of the U.P.A. were just fighting for their homeland. He added that Russian tourists were his second biggest clientele, after visitors from central and eastern Ukraine.

Suddenly, an air-raid siren howled and the lights went out.

“Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” someone shouted. We heard recorded gunshots, and a group of U.P.A. partisans ran into our room. “A cursed enemy has crawled into our bunker!” They pointed to a man at a nearby table.

“Get up here!” The partisans dragged the man against the wall, illuminating his body with flashlights and prodding his pockets.

“Do you love Ukraine?”

“Yes!” the patron said, happy to follow the script.

“Where do you come from? Did you come here to support us? Did you bring us guns?”

“Yes!” he answered. The partisans let him go and made their way to the next room.

When the lights came back on, I asked Nazaruk whether it was okay to

commodify history while ignoring its more unpleasant moments—there was no mention of the slaughter of Poles or Jews or civilians. “Yes, they were fighting and they were killing and I cannot say that it’s normal,” he told me. “But it’s the definition of world war. They were not kissing one another.”

If Kryivka made me uncomfortable, I was in for an even tougher time at Zhidivska Knaypa—another Nazaruk creation, whose name means “Jewish Tavern” or “Kike Tavern,” depending on whom you ask.<sup>2</sup> The gimmick there is a menu without prices, presumably because Jews bargain for everything anyway. The restaurant was lit by menorahs. There was matzo instead of leavened bread, and the décor included bobbleheads with big noses.

I told myself to lighten up. Perhaps the place really did educate people about Lviv’s Galician Jews, most of whom had been murdered or deported during the war. I smiled with my waitress while she recited her memorized speech about bargaining for the meal. Did I have anything in my bag I might use for barter? Could I sing her a Jewish song? (At a nearby table, diners offered their waitress a banana and then broke into a lusty rendition of “Hava Nagila,” congratulating one another on knowing the lyrics.) I was getting the hang of it. This could be fun. Then my waitress offered me an additional discount if I told her a Jewish joke.

This brought me up short. Curious to see how closely the restaurant stuck to its pedagogical mission, I asked if I could tell an offensive joke—and she agreed to hear me out. That ruined it for me. I could just about see the Jewish gimmickry as an educational tool, but trotting out negative stereotypes to get a cheaper meal struck me as counterproductive. When I put it to Nazaruk, at first he seemed to agree. The invitation to tell a Jewish joke was, he said, “not normal.” But when I asked Nazaruk how

it had gotten into the script, he changed the subject.

**T**his was a common occurrence during my time in Ukraine: every time I touched on a sensitive topic, people would either shut down or change the

<sup>2</sup> In contemporary Russian, *zhid* means “kike.” In contemporary Ukrainian, however, the word has no negative connotations and simply means “Jew.”

conversation. Language itself was a contentious issue, one that caused impassioned outbursts and eloquent silences. At a lunch with historians and writers in Drohobych, outside of Lviv, I asked why Russian couldn’t be a second national language. My tablemate shouted that such a move would lead to the “genocide of Ukrainian!” After that, the other guests simply stopped speaking to me. I focused on the food; it was delicious.

Of course, language has long been a political football in Ukraine. Under the Russian Empire and during the Soviet era, Ukrainian was suppressed. After independence, it became the national language. Under Yanukovych, the parliament passed a law allowing regions to designate Russian as a second language—but once he fled, in 2014, the law was repealed, then resurrected by the interim president, Oleksandr Turchynov. In this fashion, he hoped to appease the restive population in the east. Nevertheless, the damage was done: the attempted repeal was seen as a nefarious provocation of Russian speakers, and was often cited by Putin’s propaganda machine as evidence of Kiev’s anti-Russian slant.

Many Ukrainians maintain that the country’s conflict does not split along linguistic lines. They point to the presence of Russian speakers among the Euromaidan protesters and in the military and volunteer battalions fighting in the east, and argue for a new inclusive national narrative based on the martyrs of the Euromaidan, known as the Heavenly Hundred. To this pantheon they add current combatants, POWs, and the civilians who are donating time, goods, and money to the war effort.

“What’s happening right now is a sped-up process of forming a Ukrainian political nation,” Volodymir Viatrovykh, the new director of the National Institute of Memory, told me in Kiev. “Those participating in this war have ancestors who fought for the independence of Ukraine in the 1940s and 1950s—and ancestors who fought against them. The inheritors of the U.P.A. and the inheritors of the Soviet army and the N.K.V.D. are now all fighting for Ukraine.”

To codify the new narrative, Viatrovykh is planning yet another museum to focus on periods of Ukrainian independence, as well as the 1990s, the Orange

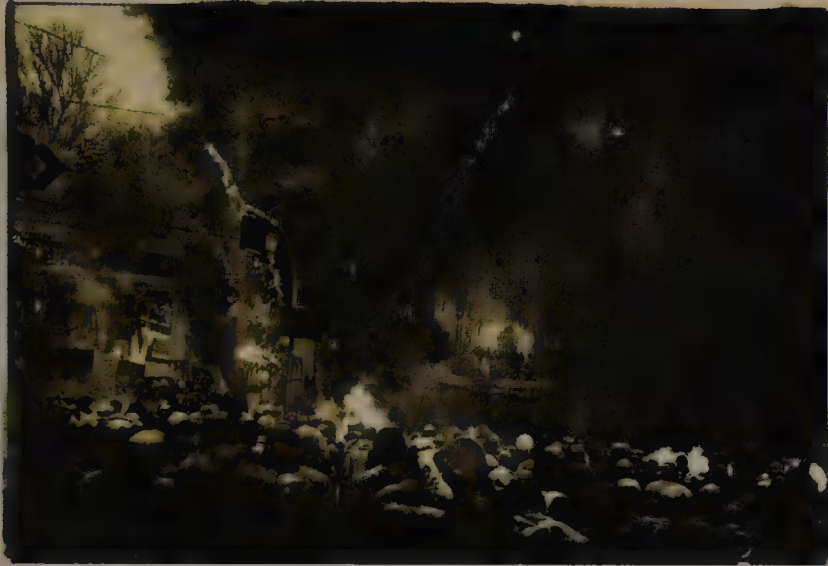
Revolution, the Euromaidan protests, and the current conflict. The working title is: Museum of the Euromaidan, Museum of Freedom. Yet even Viatrovykh, an apparent apostle of inclusivity, has his limits. This spring, he championed a successful parliamentary bill to ban all Communist propaganda, including monuments and place-names with any ties to the Soviet regime.

It should be noted that my mother and grandmother were both born within the borders of today’s Ukraine. Although I grew up in New York City, my first language was Russian. My mother speaks English with the thick accent of a villain in a Cold War-era film—but Russian was the language she used during my childhood to berate me for becoming “too American.” What were the alternatives? The moment the U.S.S.R. collapsed, forever changing the outlines on my elementary-school maps, I could no longer technically tell people that I was Russian-American. Since my grandmother and mother were born in Kiev, wasn’t I Ukrainian-American?

That seemed ridiculous. How could I be from a country whose language I didn’t speak? One that didn’t exist when I was born? The people I met in Ukraine never warmed to the idea that I was one of them, either, no matter how many times I told them that my mother was born in Kiev. And yet my sense of displacement, of linguistic and ethnic confusion, was surely a distant echo of their own.

**A**fter Lviv, I traveled east to Dnipropetrovsk, which had been expected to fall to the separatists after Donetsk. Primarily Russian-speaking, with historic ties to Moscow, Dnipro (as the locals call it) had been home to a secret ballistic-missile plant that employed engineers from across the U.S.S.R. The city remained closed to foreigners until 1987. Its first pro-Russian demonstration, in March 2014, brought several thousand people into the streets. Protesters brandished clubs and weapons, clashes ensued, the police melted away, and a Russian flag was planted on top of the city-council building.

But last winter, when I visited, the streets were festooned with yellow-and-blue banners, all written in Russian, that



proclaimed, I'M PROUD TO BE UKRAINI-  
AN. I WAS BORN IN DNIPROPETROVSK. In  
the city center, a marble plaque read,  
THE VICTORY OF COMMUNISM IS INEVI-  
TABLE, but someone had covered the first  
two letters of VICTORY with a spray-  
painted Ukrainian flag, turning the  
word into TRAGEDY. At the height of the  
city's own Euromaidan-style protests, a  
crowd spent nearly six hours toppling  
the monumental statue of Lenin in the  
central square, after which it was broken  
into pieces and carried away by history-  
minded souvenir hunters. But Dnipro's  
main thoroughfare is still called Karl  
Marx Avenue, and apparently a couple  
of smaller statues of Lenin have been left  
as they were.<sup>3</sup>

I found the pragmatic attitude of  
Dnipro a relief from the defensive na-

tionalism I had felt in Lviv and Kiev.  
Yet so many of the Soviet historical  
myths and linguistic cleavages were  
present here: how did the city remain  
within territorial Ukraine, while its  
neighbor, Donetsk, had revolted? When I sat down with Borys Filatov,  
who was then the deputy governor of  
Dnipro, he told me the answer was  
simple: They worked for it.

Filatov made his fortune on shop-  
ping malls. With his boxy frame, buzz  
cut, and black T-shirt, he looks like a  
gangster, an impression encouraged by  
a recent Facebook post, which offered  
his recipe for quelling civic unrest:  
"Give the scum promises [and] guar-  
antees and then hang them." And yet  
he describes himself as a humble civil  
servant who was called upon to de-  
fend the integrity of his homeland.<sup>4</sup>

In Donetsk, he told me, the local  
elites had purposely inflamed separatist  
sentiment because they were afraid they  
would be punished for crimes committed  
under the previous regime. In Dnipro,  
meanwhile, the oligarchs and elites took

<sup>4</sup> Shortly after we spoke, Filatov resigned  
from his position in order to enter the  
Ukrainian Parliament.

a pro-Ukrainian position. As soon as  
they came to power, Filatov and the  
other leaders of the new administration  
signed a statement promising that there  
would be no lustration, no ideological  
vendettas. In exchange, pro-Russian  
activists officially acknowledged  
Ukraine's territorial integrity.

"We were working for twenty hours  
a day," Filatov recalled. "We held ne-  
gotiations with all the forces: the left-  
ists, the rightists, the Right Sector,  
Communists, separatists—that is to  
say, with all the idiots. We managed  
to separate the separatist forces. I  
mean, we managed to agree with  
some of them, bribe some of them,  
and even threaten some of them."

A second memorandum was signed  
on March 20. According to Filatov, the  
pro-Russian parties to the agreement  
and the pro-Ukrainian parties didn't  
want to share a single piece of paper,  
which led them to sign separate versions  
in their preferred languages. Yet they did  
agree to postpone all discussions of fed-  
eralization and language, and to oppose  
violence, the desecration of monu-  
ments, and all protests except those  
supporting unity. Pro-Russian rallies in

the city immediately started shrinking; by June 22, only thirty-six people came out to wave placards and denounce Kiev. Meanwhile, in Donetsk, the separatist protests raged out of control.

Unlike many other self-described patriots, Filatov acknowledged that civilians had been caught in the middle of the conflict. When I was in Dnipro, the Ukrainian army shelled its own citizens in Donetsk—a practice that continues now, despite another truce that was declared in February. Filatov blamed the separatists. “The situation is horrible,” he said, “but we have nothing to apologize for, since we didn’t start it.” On the bright side, he said, the Ukrainian artillery that was firing into Donetsk hadn’t turned the place into rubble, which is what the Russians did to the rebellious Chechen city of Grozny twenty years earlier. “So I can say that the Ukrainian

side demonstrates a certain humanism in this conflict.”

**I**n Filatov’s view, one of the greatest dangers to Dnipro is its proximity to the separatists. The city is the first stop for many refugees heading out of Donetsk, and these internally displaced people (I.D.P.’s) tend to get a mixed reception. The government in Kiev had marched into what it was calling the Anti-Terrorist Operation zone (A.T.O.) without establishing any real evacuation plan for residents of the area. The task of moving and resettling them was left to NGOs and civilian volunteers. There was sympathy for the refugees in Dnipro, but there was also a lot of suspicion, scorn, and even vitriol.

Of course, contempt for I.D.P.’s was also common in western Ukraine, where the old stereotypes of the east as Soviet and bad still prevailed. In Kiev, I had met Katrusya, a young woman who carried a baseball bat in her car because a family of I.D.P.’s had settled on her block. Her car had a red-and-black Right Sector flag on it, and she worried that her new neighbors might beat her for her political beliefs. Or just because they were violent criminals. Either way, she wasn’t happy they had moved in, though the situation has since improved.

Her friend Rodion, a volunteer fighter in the Ukrainian army who also delivered donated supplies to units on the eastern front, took it a step further. “These people are not Ukrainians,” he

told me. He insisted that after the Holodomor killed everybody in Donbas (a traditional name for the eastern part of the country), the Soviets had simply repopulated the area with the dregs of their own society. It was, he said, where “all former criminals from the whole territory of the U.S.S.R. were moved to live. That is why Donbas is a criminal enclave within Ukraine.”

Still, Dnipro was next door to this criminal enclave, and was presumed to be the next city in line should the Russian-backed separatists advance deeper into the heart of Ukraine. Shouldn’t there be an extra modicum of sympathy for people driven from their homes? Not necessarily.

Dnipro Assistance, an NGO dedicated to refugees, is housed on the third floor of an old building in the city center. When I visited, I.D.P.’s waited on benches in a drafty hallway to be registered. Some had come for humanitarian aid: an office distributed clothing, shoes, and toys. Others were looking for housing, or attempting to collect pension and welfare payments. Kiev had recently cut off all such services to people living in the A.T.O.

Irina Bulyshova, a psychologist at the organization, told me that as many as a hundred refugees pass through the office each day. Bulyshova resembled a harried gym teacher, her long blond hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, multiple sets of keys jingling in one hand and a phone, which never stopped ringing, in the other. An elderly couple who had arrived in Dnipro that morning wanted to know whether they could list the NGO as their residence in order to get their pension checks.

“No,” Bulyshova said.

The old woman, wearing a fur coat and hat, said that she and her husband had no money and nowhere to go. They hadn’t received their pension in weeks. The journey through the rebel and government checkpoints to get to Dnipro had been stressful, and the couple seemed to be in shock, unsure about what to do next.

“Whatever address you list, we’ll check it,” Bulyshova told them.

“Stop frightening me, young woman,” came the reply. “I understand.”

“I’m not scaring you, I’m just warning you.”

“Please,” the woman said. She stood over her husband, a weathered

man in a puffy jacket. “We understood everything.”

“People who come here for pensions, we’re not even obligated to help you,” Bulyshova added. “This is a government matter.” She left the pair with another worker to complete their registration. As we walked out, they were silent, shuffling their papers. The old man hadn’t said a word, just held on tightly to his satchel.

Later, Bulyshova insisted that the woman was gaming the system, hoping to collect her pension before returning home to Donetsk. “That woman is old,” she said, “but her head works. She came with a plan.” Bulyshova said she could pick out the liars and cheats by asking just a few questions.

My heart sank. The elderly couple had worked their whole lives for their pension, only to be treated like scam artists when they tried to collect it. Weren’t they still citizens of Ukraine, even if the Russians had invaded their city? And if they wanted to return home after collecting their checks, could you really blame them?

For Bulyshova, these were sentimental questions that weighed little in her calculations. After all, 610,000 people had by then fled the fighting in the east, and 66,100 of those refugees had registered in Dnipro. There was an acute housing shortage, and every I.D.P. who registered in the city for the sake of convenience and then sneaked back to Donetsk was taking a spot away from a truly deserving (i.e., pro-Ukrainian) refugee.

Ultimately, Bulyshova was taking a page from her government’s playbook. President Poroshenko has persistently used us-versus-them rhetoric, even when it comes to social services. As he told an audience in October:

We will have pensions, they won’t!  
We will have care for our children and pensioners and they won’t! Our children will go to school and kindergartens, and theirs will sit in basements!

Gesticulating from the podium, he seemed to forget that these outcasts—the penniless pensioners and the children in bomb shelters—were his citizens, too.

What Bulyshova really needed, she told me, was a policeman on the premises. Then the dubious I.D.P.’s could be ushered straight into their arms, and the center’s workers would feel safer. “There

are lots of marginals and agitators,” she told me. “We’re not going to be patient with them.”

**T**he road into the Donetsk People’s Republic (D.N.R.) passed snow-covered fields lined by poplar trees, the dew frozen on their branches. On the day I entered, last winter, there was no shelling along my route—just craters from recent attacks.

Yet the war, and the other wars that preceded it, were everywhere. During the early 1940s, hundreds of thousands died around Donetsk as the Red Army

framed portrait of Vladimir Putin that was hanging on his office wall.

Baryshnikov explained that he had taught at the university for twenty years before being run out, in 2012, because of his pro-Russian views. Now, however, he was back—with a vengeance. He is one of the main promoters of *Novorossiia*, or New Russia, a Moscow-friendly ideology that takes its name from the eighteenth-century term for eastern Ukraine. All education would now be conducted in Russian, he told me gleefully. As we spoke, he puttered around the office

middle manager in a construction firm, earning decent money; his wife, whom I will call Isida, was an administrator at a local college; and their twenty-year-old son, whom I will call Ares, was a policeman. The family had worked hard, planted a huge garden behind their house, and voted for Yanukovych in both elections.

They had watched the Euromaidan protests in Kiev with trepidation. Cid told me that he hadn’t understood why the demonstrators couldn’t wait for the following year’s elections to choose a new president. Then, on



tried to wrest the city away from the Germans. In 1963, the Soviets built a massive complex, called the Savur-Mogila Memorial, to commemorate the battle for a strategic hill east of the city. But last summer, artillery attacks finally toppled the site’s soaring stone obelisk and damaged most of the surrounding structures.

When I stopped at the complex, the hill was covered in fog and snow. Spent bullet casings from the current conflict were everywhere, and the names of Red Army soldiers who had perished during the Second World War were engraved on a monolith at the bottom of the memorial grounds. Across the way were twenty-three fresh graves, topped with wooden crosses and wreaths, in which separatist fighters were buried.

The scene on the snowy hillside, where thousands of Ukrainians and Russians had come to rest together, suggested a shared history. At Donetsk National University, meanwhile, Sergei Baryshnikov was energetically erasing any such idea. When we met, the squat professor and university director had a St. George ribbon pinned to his vest and a D.N.R. flag on his desk. He greeted me by saluting the

and removed Ukrainian-language books from his shelves.

“I’m not fighting on the front,” Baryshnikov said, “but I have another battle.”

His recent victories included rewriting the standard university curriculum. Instead of taking classes on Ukrainian history, college students would now study Patriotic and Regional History, with much less emphasis on the Holodomor (which, Baryshnikov said, the central government used to “make a few points in its collection of lies”). He added that Ukrainian wasn’t a real ethnicity and that the language was merely a Russian dialect, a “fake, primitive, folklore language.” The biggest problem, he said, was that the university had no internationally recognizable diplomas to bestow on its graduates. Baryshnikov was working on it.

**I** met Cid and his family at a café in central Donetsk. Cid (a nom de guerre, borrowed from the legendary Spanish insurgent) was a genial, soft-spoken forty-year-old with bright blue eyes and a graying crew cut. He had worked as a

May 2, 2014, a fire in Odessa killed almost forty pro-Russian protesters. It’s not clear what really happened that day: pro-Ukrainians, avenging a prior attack on their own ranks, had chased a group of pro-Russians into a building, which then caught fire. Whether arson or an accident caused the fire is still not known. But the Russian media quickly suggested that Ukrainian nationalists were taking the first step toward a slaughter.

Cid watched the events unfold on television. “I went insane,” he told me. He was convinced that his family would be next, and four weeks later, he crossed over from Yasynuvata—a village still under Ukrainian control—to join the separatist militia in the “liberated territory” of Donetsk.

Isida joined him at the beginning of August. Both parents urged their son to stay behind, but by the end of the month he had crossed over as well. The entire family enlisted in the Oplot Battalion of the Donbas People’s Militia. Cid was a unit commander. Ares worked in explosives, digging up and dismantling land mines. Isida was a cook.

The family told me that there was no turning back. As long as Yasynuvata

belonged to Ukraine, they would never go home. "They'll shoot me there," Cid explained. "They'll shoot all of us, and before that, they'll torture us. That's how it is." Like their counterparts in the west, who assume that everybody in Donbas is a Soviet idiot and a criminal, the family has a jaundiced view of the Euro-maidan protesters (paid agitators on drugs) and the Ukrainian army (rapists, psychopaths, criminals). And they don't appreciate being viewed as idiots.

"In 2004, we stepped back and waved our hands, fine, let your Yushchenko be," Cid told me. "Then Yushchenko gave the Hero of Ukraine to someone the Nuremberg trials found to have committed crimes against humanity: Stepan Bandera."

Bandera was never actually brought before the Nuremberg trials. Still, the whole family seemed aggrieved at Yushchenko's rewriting of history. Isida recalled that over time her son's textbooks made less and less sense. "There was such garbage written in there," she said. "I couldn't understand if it was even about Ukraine. The real heroes weren't there. It was like the Great Patriotic War never happened."

Of course, Cid and his family hadn't gone to war over the high-school curriculum, and although they displayed some nostalgia for the U.S.S.R., they weren't pensioners reminiscing about the good old days. In their minds, they had suffered too many insults; the revised textbooks were one more drop in the bucket. Isida was still fuming over what she viewed as the politicization of the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest, when Ukraine's vice prime minister backed a band called GreenJolly to represent the nation. The band was best known for its performance of "Together We Are Many," the unofficial anthem of the Orange Revolution. But when it came time for the international competition, GreenJolly tanked, placing nineteenth out of twenty-four entrants. To add insult to injury, 2005 was the year that Ukraine hosted the contest. "We have such talented singers," Isida told me mournfully.

"Why do they hate us?" Ares said. "What did we do?"

"We're not fighting against Ukrainians, we're fighting against fascism," Cid said. "Because intolerance to another perspective is fascism." Only when the

nation had its own version of the Nuremberg trials, he insisted, could there be "talk about a united Ukraine."

"I don't want a united Ukraine," Isida said. "Maybe a united Ukraine but without the western part. They don't want to be with us."

"The oligarchs set them this way," Cid countered.

"But they were fed this with their mothers' milk. They don't want to be with us ever."

"The next generation, if we do it right," Cid told her.

This was the vexing thing about Ukraine: the demand for justice came from both sides. Everybody was tired of the nation's oligarchs, its corruption, its daily assault on the dignity of every citizen. The Euro-maidan protesters looked toward Europe, the east looked toward Russia. When I told people that I didn't think either geopolitical ally would be much help, they agreed. Still, Ukrainians remained divided, looking for heroes from the past and seeking help from across the border, any border.

After five weeks in Ukraine, I was anxious to leave its psychological and physical fragmentation behind. As someone had told me during an earlier trip, there wasn't a park in the entire country that held statues of both Lenin and Bandera, and no one seemed interested in building one. Of course the threat (and then the reality) of Russian interference had boosted nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, but I feared that these were merely manifestations of more durable and dangerous social problems.

Even if you took the Western narrative at face value—that Putin was the big bad wolf who blew Ukraine's house down—why was it so easy? The foundations must have been rotten, cobbled together after decades of woozy, cynical, agitated speculation about Ukrainian identity.

It was hard to be optimistic about the new national narrative when it intentionally excluded large segments of the population and played on the same stereotypes that fueled the conflict to begin with. Stodgy museums and nation-building projects aside, the friction owed much to the way people perceived

one another today. The civilians in the east viewed the west as their enemy—and it was, of course, their own military that was shelling them while they slept. Those in the west viewed the east as their enemy—and not only for their secessionist treachery. There was no real campaign for hearts and minds from either side. When the war ended, if it ever did, how would the nation find enough common ground to heal itself?

After I left, I found myself thinking a lot about a woman I had met in Donetsk. Marina Tkachenko's family tree looked like the result of a complicated scavenger hunt. Her mother is ethnic Russian and her great-grandmother was Jewish. Her father is Ukrainian, though his mother was Russian and his father, a veteran of the Soviet army, was a Jew who reinvented himself as Ukrainian.

"Everyone is confused, Ukrainians are confused, we are confused," she told me. "Who am I now? Russian? Ukrainian? My nationality is the D.N.R.? What is that? It's a real question. Am I no one?"

Tkachenko told me that she hoped the east would return to Ukraine but that she wasn't sure it was possible after so much blood had been spilled. Her brother had tried to join the Ukrainian National Guard and her father had tried to join a separatist militia. Both men had announced their intentions on the same night in November. Tkachenko's mother called her, wailing and weeping. When Tkachenko got to their apartment, she gathered them in the living room. "God, I'm so sick of you!" she exclaimed. "What's wrong with your heads? Calm down, we'll survive!"

"What will be okay when bombs are flying at us?" her father shouted.

"Good thing they are flying!" her brother shouted back. "I'll go! I'll bomb everything!"

Father and son lunged at each other like rabid dogs. Tkachenko recalled that they were blue from hate. The women pulled them apart and into separate rooms, made tea, and then tried to reason with them in the kitchen. While her mother talked, Tkachenko rooted around in the family's files. She quietly pocketed her brother's certificate of basic training, and then her father's—documents they would require in order to serve in their respective military groups. She hasn't returned them since. ■

# AVIAN VOICES

Trying not to kill a mockingbird

By James Seay



I made a deal with the deer: *I plant double, you take your half, I take my half.* They broke the deal before the ink was dry. Shoots of corn and beans, and later the flowers of peppers both hot and sweet—cayenne, tabasco, California Wonder—the deer went deep into my half for any tender offering. Even my heirloom zinnias. So I built a standard three-rail fence around the garden. Three rails, though, are like Tinkertoys to deer. They jumped my ridiculous fence and were back in the garden early the next morning, taking out a further swath of summer's promised bounty. I nailed iron posts to the fence corners for elevation and then strung plastic mesh. They jumped into the mesh and, I think, immediately back out; the mesh apparently frightened them. I restrung it, and the garden became mine again. Until a mockingbird swooped down on

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me. I was transplanting Burpee's Big Boy tomato seedlings with a small shovel when he attacked, and I threw the shovel at him. That was my first engagement with this, or any, mockingbird.

He pushed his claim to high office again when the Big Boy transplants had matured and began to fruit. The least hint of red was his beacon. He would peck into the red just enough to ruin the entire tomato. And so I moved my tomato patch into a small abandoned dog kennel and put the magic plastic mesh over the top to keep him off my Big Boys, Brandywines, German Johnsons, Black Krims, Mortgage Lifters, and Mr. Stripeys. This infuriated

him, and he began to make dedicated swoops at me when I went out in the morning to get my newspaper.

According to the website Birdzilla, the mockingbird is very aggressive when it comes to defending its territory and nest, attacking even snakes, cats, and humans. The mockingbird is also a talented vocal mimic, Birdzilla tells us, and can imitate the songs of many other birds, as well as man-made noises such as car

alarms or squeaky pumps. I have read, too, that it can mimic the bark of a dog. Before federal laws were passed to protect native birds, so many mockingbirds were captured for the pet trade that they became scarce across much of their natural range.

This one is not scarce across any part of my range of four acres. And it is clear from his derring-do and claim to dominion that he regards himself in heroic measures. Beowulf's windblown and birdlike ship comes to mind—here, in Seamus Heaney's translation:

Over the waves, with the wind behind her

and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird  
until her curved prow had covered the distance  
and on the following day, at the due hour,  
those seafarers sighted land,  
sunlit cliffs, sheer crags  
and looming headlands, the landfall  
they sought.

He is the very ship that has plied its way through difficult waters to reach the sunlit cliffs, sheer crags, and looming headlands that are now transformed into my yard and vegetable garden. But he is outraged by the traditional gender assignment. The ship, a she. That's part of how I account for his animus. The other part is that he's just an asshole.

Among his other assumptions of regnancy, he has taken over my bird-bath, which is a tidy copper basin designed for the feathered friends to whom I have extended a welcome: my Carolina wrens—*tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle-tea*, or sometimes simply *toodlewee*; the titmice—*Peter-Peter*; the goldfinches—*per-chick-o-ree* or *potato-chips*, also *zwe-zeeeee*; and my favorite, the common sparrow—*come-come-where-where-all-together-down-the-hill*. (Voices rendered by the Audubon Society *Field Guide to North American Birds*.) In their bathing, these favored birds of mine have a delicate economy of motion, soft flicks and twitches, conserving water as if they know others are waiting in line. The mockingbird's bath is an orgy of thrashing and writhing about. When he has finished, one of the innocents alights on the rim of the basin and looks with disbelief at the thimble of water remaining.

And so daintiness and restraint are not qualities inscribed in the mockingbird psyche. Nor is reason. Mockingbirds will attack their reflection in a window, hubcap, or mirror, often with such intensity that they injure or kill themselves. My mockingbird went at himself for hours in the side-view mirror of my Ford Ranger pickup, repeatedly challenging the invader with what the Audubon guide describes as a harsh *chack*. (To be fair, the bird is capable of music, but is it finally his?

The songs of thirty-six other species were recognized from the recording of one mockingbird in Massachusetts. Serious personality disorder there, or unrelenting guile.)

As for injury and death in general, those losses are part of the natural order of a bird's life. Usually it is death from above. Have you ever seen a bird's eyes not constantly parsing the sky? Landward there are cats ready to pounce. And other threats you wouldn't dream of. A black snake climbed a column on my front porch and ate the eggs in a nest my sparrows had built on the overhead beam. The natural order, I figured. Not that I wasn't chilled to see the snake on the beam above me, its overlapping coil gleaming ebony in the morning light. I poked it down with a shovel and took it to a thick winter-honeysuckle bush at the edge of my yard. I wanted to keep it around to eat the field mice and rats that had my garage in mind. The bulge of three sparrow eggs in the snake's body was unmistakable.

Other sparrows had a nest in the bend of a downspout just outside one of my front windows. The nest was at eye level with the window, and I would stand there to watch the mother bird feed her four peeps. The day after I delivered the black snake to its safe haven, I looked out to find the nest empty. On the ground by the downspout were the dead bodies of two of the peeps. These were not fledglings, and I reasoned that the snake had come from the honeysuckle, had its fill of the two other baby sparrows in the nest, and then dropped these two to the ground. Or perhaps they had attempted flight.

So it goes. The snares and foils are many. Birds mistake the large windows on either side of my house for open passages and fly into them. I can hear their bonks as they hit the glass. I go out and try to help them get reoriented. A gorgeous yellow-shafted flicker wobbled around for twenty minutes or so after I gave it a gentle massage, and then took flight into the trees bordering my creek. Doves hit particularly hard; they are fleet and some-

times don't recover from the collision with what looks to them like *plein air*. One afternoon I heard an unusually forceful hit and went out to find a dead dove on the grass. I plucked the feathers, freed the breast, and took it inside. Sautéed in butter with a sliver of garlic and hint of thyme, it was three-star Michelin, five-toque Gault et Millau.

More recently a pine siskin collided with a window. As with the dove, I was unable to revive it. It reminded me, though, of the ortolan, a bunting that some French gourmands drown in Armagnac, pluck, roast, and eat whole. I couldn't bring myself to eat the little pine siskin, not even if prepared in the manner of my dove. As for the ortolan, European Union member states have banned the deliberate killing or capture of these birds because of their endangered status. The French have been lax in enforcing the ban, and poachers continue to trap this sparrow-size bird. Diners cover their faces with linen napkins and eat the entire bird, though the less venturesome forgo the head, beak, and feet. The covering of the face is said to have been initiated by a priest (friend to French gourmand Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin), who did so to hide his gluttony from God.

I have followed a red-shouldered hawk—*kee-yeeear*—from the time he was a fledgling. He was in a black walnut tree at the border of my property when I first spotted him, and for the past few years I have watched through binoculars as he drops down precipitously on field mice. He will also eat grubs. And occasionally I find clusters of fluffy gray feathers in the grass, but I do not know if he or some other raptor has intercepted a flying dove. That would be no small feat. My mockingbird will attack other birds, and me, but he does not mess with this hawk. I was elated recently to spot my hawk and a female, only just arrived, resting together on a piece of sculpture in my back yard. I am hoping for young red-shoulders soon from their pairing.

My sculpture appropriates an iron wheel rim from an old farm wagon.

Welded within the circle of that rim is a sinuous S of metal, making for a yin-yang effect. Bluebirds often perch on the sculpture, though always solo for some reason. The smaller birds tend not to perch there, perhaps because the wheel rim is too wide to afford a secure purchase. Or maybe the mojo of the mandala is too much for them. I don't know. I am not a birder by any stretch, but I can sit and watch these creatures—in the birdbath or on the wheel rim or in flight—for long periods of time, rapt with fascination and wonder.

In all of this behavior, I detect a manifest social order in the bird kingdom, and I don't mean simply a pecking order. The cowbird, for instance, is a brood parasite. It lays its eggs in the nests of songbirds. Some of them will reject the cowbird egg; others will lay down a new nest lining over it. But most will rear the young cowbird, which matures quickly at the expense of the host's young, pushing them out of the nest or taking their food. Added to this parasitic behavior is the cowbird's lack of any prepossessing physical attractiveness, at least to my eye. I watched a brown-headed cowbird alight near three of my common sparrows on a section of fence. Sort of like Charlie Chaplin disciples, the sparrows edged away in a comical sideways avoidance maneuver. The cowbird tiptoed awkwardly along the fence railing after them, trying to seem nonchalant but making an obvious bid to be a buddy. He edged over, they twiddled a few steps away, he edged over again, and the sparrows finally took flight. The cowbird remained there, alone and gripping the fence rail in ignominy.

I am not going to kill the mockingbird. Truth to tell, I have become amused at his antics. Yesterday morning I walked out toward my garden and he took flight from the fence. I have a greenhouse that is elevated on wood pilings, but there is only a three-foot space between its floor beam and the ground. The mockingbird made a straight course for that restricted opening and flew under the greenhouse and out the other side.

Show-off. But maybe a hint of détente. He didn't swoop down on me.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Miss Maudie Atkinson tells Scout that "mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

Up against Miss Maudie's sentimentality—and my own, in tracing the delights of my little birds—is an alternative truth. In the closing scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, there is a robin on a tree branch. The robin is central to a dream that Laura Dern's character has had, and she interprets its return as the return of love. The scene is controversial, but I regard it as ironic. The robin (which, by the way, is a stuffed robin) has a bug in its beak, and its gaze registers nothing resembling love. Dern's character is in denial of the reality of predation, dramatized in chilling detail by Dennis Hopper's character as he inhales whatever it is, helium or nitrous oxide, from a face mask and enters a deeper chamber of his psychosis. And so what are the truths that birds bring to us in their perches and flights, and in our dreams of them?

In the Venerable Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (circa 731 A.D.), we are told of a bird who flew into a festive hall from the night of rain and snow outside, only to pass into that night again through a window on the other side of the hall. Such is our brief passage through life. It is from darkness into darkness, unknown on either side. But there is the warmth and light and joy and sadness of the hall. In my imagination it is a mead hall, with venison and pheasant, quail, the pig on the spit, dogs asleep by the ancestral fire, bold women and men our friends, laughter, song, weeping over spoken poems of human error and downfall. We are that bird in flight. But we are not alone. Flying with us are the wrens and titmice, the goldfinches, my two hawks, the common sparrows. Come! Come! Where? Where? All Together Down the Hill! ■

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# ONE DAY LESS

By Clarice Lispector

Translated from the Portuguese by Katrina Dodson

I doubt that death will come. Death? Could it be that the days, so long, will end?

That's how I daydream, calm, quiet. Could it be that death is a bluff? A trick of life? Is it persecution?

And that's how it is.

The day had begun at four in the morning, she'd always risen early, immediately finding the flask of coffee in the little pantry. She drank a lukewarm cup and was about to leave it for Augusta to wash, when she remembered that old Augusta had asked for a month off to see her son.

She wasn't feeling up to the long day ahead: no appointments, no chores, neither joys nor sorrows.

She sat down, then, in her oldest bathrobe, since she never expected any visitors. But being so badly dressed—in a robe belonging to her late mother—didn't please her. She got up and put on the silk pajamas with blue and white

polka dots that Augusta had given her on her last birthday. That was a big improvement. And things improved still more when she sat in the armchair that had been recently reupholstered in

it is. Augusta had told her things would get better later on. That's how it is had already arrived from that's how it was.

She remembered the newspaper that she got delivered to her front door. She went over there a bit excited, you never know what you're going to read, whether the minister of Indochina will kill himself or the lover threatened by his fiancée's father will end up getting married.

But the newspaper wasn't there: that rascal of a neighbor, her enemy, must have already taken it with him. It was a constant struggle to see who first got to the newspaper that, nonetheless, had her name clearly printed

on it: Margarida Flores. Along with her address. Whenever she absentmindedly saw her name written, she recalled her primary-school nickname: Margarida Flores de Enterro. Why didn't anyone think to call her Margarida Flores de Jardim? Because things simply were not on her side. She had a silly thought: even her little face was on its side. At an angle. She didn't even wonder whether she was pretty or ugly. She was obvious.

Then.

Then she didn't have money issues.

Then there was the phone. Would she call someone? But whenever she

violet (Augusta's taste) and lit her first cigarette of the day. It was an expensive brand, with that blond tobacco, a long, slim cigarillo, meant for someone of a social class that happened not to be hers. For that matter, she just happened not to be a lot of things. And she'd just happened to be born.

And then?

Then.

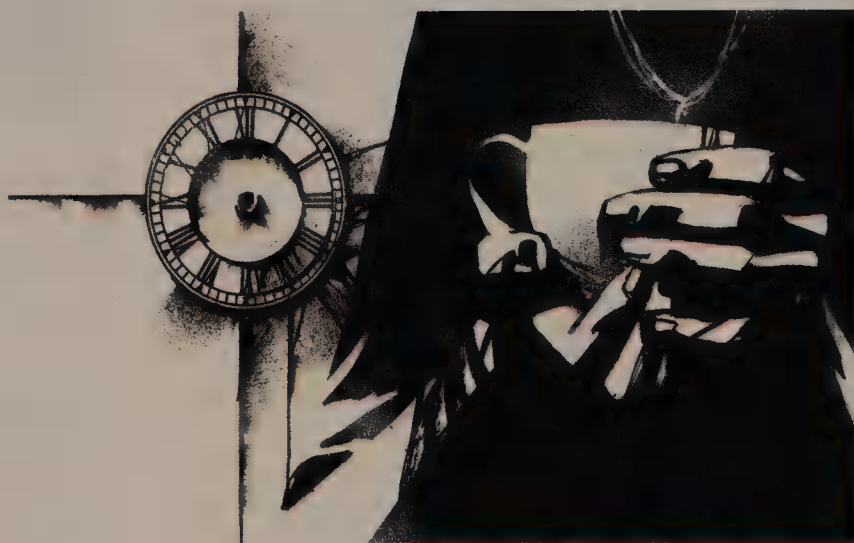
Then.

Well anyway.

That's how it is.

Isn't it?

Well, anyway well it suddenly became clear: well anyway well that's how



*Clarice Lispector (1920–77) was the author of The Passion According to G. H., among other novels. The Complete Stories, edited by Benjamin Moser, will be published by New Directions next month. This story, her last, was discovered on her desk after her death. Katrina Dodson is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Berkeley. Margarida means “daisy”; flores means “flowers”; enterro means “burial”; jardim means “garden”; bosques floridos means “flowering woods.”*

called someone she had the distinct impression that she was bothering them. For instance, interrupting a sexual embrace. Or else she was annoying because she had nothing to say.

And what if someone called her? She'd have to contain the joyful tremor in her voice at someone finally calling her. She imagined this:

"Ring-ring-ring."

"Hello? Yes?"

"Is this Margarida Flores de Jardim?"

Faced with such a suave male voice, she'd answer:

"Margarida Flores de Bosques Floridos!"

And the melodious voice would ask her to afternoon tea at the Confeitaria Colombo. Just in time she remembered that men these days ask you not to tea and toast but for a drink. Which would already complicate things: for a drink you definitely had to be dressed more boldly, more mysteriously, more distinctively, more ... She wasn't very distinctive. And she made people a little uncomfortable, not a lot.

And, besides, the phone didn't ring.

Then. She was what she saw when she saw herself in the mirror. She rarely ever saw herself in the mirror, as if she already knew herself too well. And she ate too much. She was fat and her fat was extremely pale and flabby.

Then she decided to arrange her underwear and bra drawer: she was just the sort who arranged underwear and bra drawers, the delicate task gave her a sense of well-being. And if she were married, her husband would have a row of ties perfectly in order, by color, or by ... By whatever. Since there's always something to guide you and your arranging. As for herself, she was guided by the fact that she wasn't married, that she'd had the same maid since birth, that she was a thirty-year-old woman, who wore just a touch of lipstick, drab clothing ... and what else? She quickly avoided the "what else" because that question would make her fall into a very self-centered and ungrateful feeling: she'd feel lonely, which was a sin because whoever has God is never alone. She had God, since wasn't that the only thing she had? Besides Augusta.

So she went to take a bath, which gave her such pleasure that she couldn't help wondering what other bodily pleasures might be like. Being a

virgin at the age of thirty, there was nothing for it, unless she got raped by a hoodlum. Once her bath and her thinking were over, talcum powder, talcum powder, lots of talcum powder. And tons and tons of deodorant: she doubted anyone in Rio de Janeiro smelled less than she did. She might be the most odorless of creatures. And she emerged from the bathroom, so to speak, in a light minuet.

Then.

Then she saw to her great satisfaction, on the kitchen clock, that it was already eleven ... How time had flown since four in the morning. What a gift for time to pass. As she was warming the pale, flabular chicken from dinner, she turned on the radio and caught a man in the middle of a thought: "flute and guitar" ... the man said, and suddenly she couldn't stand it and turned the radio off. As if "flute and guitar" were in fact her secret, longed-for, and unattainable way of being. She mustered her courage and said very softly: flute and guitar.

Once the radio and above all her thinking were turned off, the rooms sank into a silence: as if someone somewhere had just died and ... But fortunately there was the noise of the pan warming the pieces of chicken that, who knew, might be gaining some color and flavor. She started eating. But immediately realized her mistake: because she'd taken the chicken out of the fridge and only warmed it slightly, there were parts where the fat was gelatinous and cold, and others where it was burned and dried out.

Yes.

And for dessert? She reheated a little of her breakfast and seasoned it with bitter sweetener so she'd never gain weight. She would take great pride in being practically emaciated.

Then.

She remembered apropos of nothing that millions of people were starving, in her country and elsewhere. She felt distress every time she ate.

Then.

Then! How had she forgotten about television? Ah, without Augusta she forgot everything. She turned it on, full of hope. But at that hour they were showing only old westerns constantly interrupted by commercials for onions, maxi pads, red-currant syrup that must be tasty but fattening. She sat there star-

ing. She decided to light a cigarette. That would improve everything since it made her into a painting at an exhibition: *Woman Smoking in Front of Television*. It was only after a long while that she realized she wasn't even watching television and was just wasting electricity. She switched it off with relief.

Then.

Then?

Then she decided to read old magazines, something she hadn't done in a while. They had been piled up in her mother's room, ever since her death. But they were a bit too dated, some from back when her mother had been single, the fashions were different, all the men had mustaches, ads for girdles to perfect your waistline. And in particular all the men had mustaches. She lost her enthusiasm, once more lacking the nerve to throw them out because they'd been her mother's.

Then.

Yes and then?

Then she went to boil some water for tea, still not forgetting that the phone wasn't ringing. If only she had co-workers, but she didn't have a job: the inheritance from her father and mother covered her few expenses. Anyway she didn't have nice handwriting and thought they didn't accept applicants without nice handwriting.

She drank the boiling-hot tea, chewing small pieces of dry toast that scratched her gums. They'd be better with a little butter. But, of course, butter was fattening, besides raising your cholesterol, whatever that modern term meant.

Just as her teeth were tearing into the third piece of toast—she usually counted things, due to a certain obsession with order, one that was ultimately innocuous and even amusing—just as she was about to eat the third piece of toast ... IT HAPPENED! I swear, she said to herself, I swear I heard the phone ring. She spit out the bite from the third piece of toast onto the tablecloth and, so as not to give the impression that she was impatient or needy, she let it ring four times, and each time was a sharp pang in her heart because what if they hung up thinking no one was home! At this terrifying thought she suddenly lunged for that fourth ring and managed to say in a rather offhand voice:

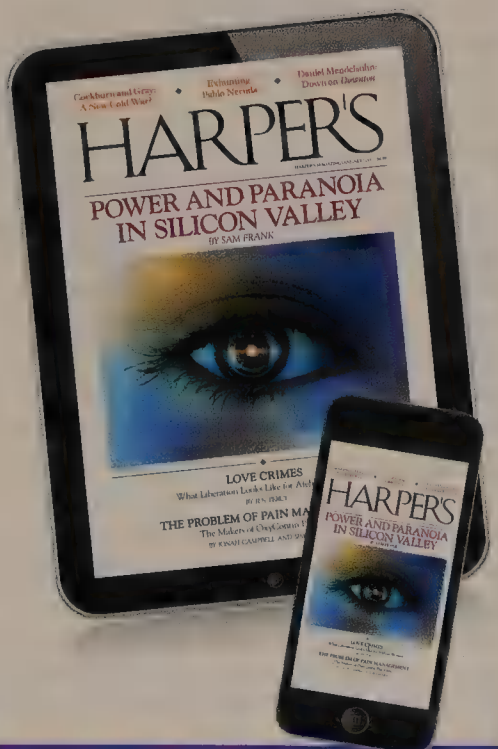
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"Hello ..."

"If you please," said the female voice that must have been over eighty, judging by its drawn-out hoarseness, "could you please call Flávia to the receiver"—no one said "receiver" anymore—"for me? My name is Constança."

"Madame Constança, I regret to inform you that there's no one in this house by the name of Flávia, I know Flávia's a very romantic name, but the thing is, there aren't any here, so what can I do?" she said with a certain despair due to Madame Constança's commanding voice.

"But isn't this General Isidro Street?"

That made matters worse.

"Yes, it is, but which phone number did you ask the operator for? Which? Mine? But I assure you that I have lived here for exactly thirty years, since birth, and there's never been any young lady named Flávia!"

"Young lady, my foot, Flávia's a year older than me and if she's lying about her age that's her problem!"

"Maybe she's not lying about her age, who knows, Madame Constança."

"If she's lying about it, that's fine with me, but at least do me a favor and tell her I'm waiting on the receiver for her and to hurry up!"

"I ... I ... I've been trying to tell you that our family was the first and only ever to live in this little house and I assure you, I swear to God, that no Senhora Flávia ever lived here, and I'm not saying that Senhora Flávia doesn't exist, but here, ma'am, here—she does not e-x-i-s-t ..."

"Now stop being rude, you hussy! By the way, what's your name?"

"Margarida Flores do Jardim."

"Why? Are there flowers in your garden?"

"Ha, ha, ha, you've got a sense of humor, ma'am! No, there aren't any flowers in my garden but I just have a flowery name."

"And does that do you any good?"

Silence.

"Well, does it or doesn't it?"

"I don't know what to say because I've never thought about it before. I can only answer questions I've already thought about."

"Then make a little effort to imagine the name Flávia and I bet you'll find the answer."

"I'm imagining, I'm imagining ... Aha, I've got it! The name of my childhood nanny is Augusta!"

"But, sweet child of the Lord, I'm running out of patience, it's not your childhood nanny I want, it's Flá-vi-a!"

"I don't want to seem rude, but my mother always said that pushy people are impolite, sorry!"

"Impolite? Me? Brought up in Paris and London? Do you at least speak French or English, so we can practice a little?"

"I only speak the language of Brazil, ma'am, and I believe it's time for you to hang up because my tea must be cold by now."

"Tea at three in the afternoon? It's quite clear you don't have the least bit of class, and here I thought you might have studied in England and would at least know what time people have tea!"

"The tea is because I had nothing to do ... Madame Constança. And now I beg you in the name of God not to torture me any longer, I'm begging you on my knees to hang up so I can finish having my Brazilian tea."

"All right, but there's no need to whine, Dona Flores, my sole and absolute intention was to speak to Flávia to invite her over for a little game of bridge. Ah! I've got an idea! Since Flávia's out, why don't you come over for a couple rounds of low-stakes cards? Hm? How about it? Aren't you tempted? And how about entertaining a lady of a certain age?"

"My God, I don't know how to play any games."

"But how can that be!"

"I just don't. That's how."

"And to what do you owe this lapse in your upbringing?"

"My father was strict: in his house the vice of card-playing was never allowed."

"Your father, your mother, and Augusta were very old-fashioned, if I may say so, and I think that ..."

"No! You may not! And now I'm the one hanging up, beg your pardon, Madame."

Wiping her eyes, she felt relieved for a moment and had an idea so novel it didn't even seem like her own: it seemed demonic, like the lady's ideas ... It was to take the

phone off the hook so that, should Madame Constança be as constant as her name, she wouldn't call back for that miserable Flávia. She blew her nose. Ah, if it weren't for her manners, what she would have said to that Constança woman! She was already regretting everything she hadn't said because of her manners.

Yes. The tea was cold.

And tasting distinctly of sweetener. The third little piece of toast spit out onto the tablecloth. The afternoon ruined. Or the day ruined? Or her life ruined? Never had she stopped to consider whether or not she was happy. So, instead of tea, she ate a slightly tart banana.

Then.

Then. Then it was four o'clock.

Then five.

Six.

Seven: dinnertime!

She would have liked to eat something else and not yesterday's chicken but she'd been taught not to waste food. She ate a dried-out thigh along with the little toasts. Truth be told, she wasn't hungry. She only sometimes perked up with Augusta because they'd talk and talk and eat, ah, they'd break their diets and not even gain weight! But Augusta would be gone for a month. A month is a lifetime.

Eight o'clock. She could already go to bed. She brushed her teeth for a long while, pensive. She put on a tattered, somewhat threadbare cotton nightgown, one of those nice cozy ones that her mother had made. And got into bed, under the covers.

Eyes wide open.

Eyes wide open.

Eyes wide open.

That was when she remembered the vials of sleeping pills that had been her mother's. She remembered her father: careful, Leontina, with the dosage, one too many could be fatal. I, Leontina would answer, don't want to leave this good life behind so soon, and I'll take just two little pills, enough to sleep soundly and wake up all rosy for my little husband.

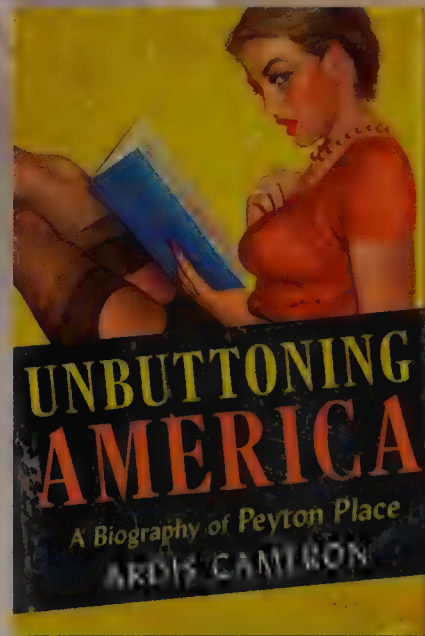
That's right, thought Margarida das Flores no Jardim, to get some nice, sound sleep and wake up rosy. She went to her mother's room, opened a drawer to the left of the big double

bed—and indeed found three vials full of tablets. She was going to take two pills to start the day rosy. She didn't have bad intentions. She went to get the pitcher and a glass. She opened one of the vials: took out two little pills. They tasted like mold and sugar. She didn't notice the slightest bad intention in herself. But no one in the world would know. And now no one would ever be able to tell whether it happened because of some sort of imbalance or ultimately because of a great balance: glassful after glassful she swallowed each and every pill from the three big vials. But on the second vial she thought for the first time in her life: "I." And it wasn't merely a rehearsal: it was in fact a debut. All of her was debuting at last. And even before they ran out, she was already feeling something in her legs, better than anything she'd ever felt. She didn't even know it was Sunday. She didn't have the strength to go to her own room: she let herself collapse on the bed where she'd been conceived. It was one day less. Vaguely she thought: if only Augusta had left me a raspberry tart. ■

#### July Index Sources

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# COUNTER CULTURE

Fighting for literature in an age of algorithms

By Caleb Crain



A new kind of disenchantment has come over literature. It has to do with what you might call the working myth of the life of literature—the half-conscious way that people decide which texts they consider literature, and how they carry those texts forward. The catalyst, I believe, is the recent revolutionary advance in count-

*Caleb Crain is the author of Necessary Errors (Penguin), a novel. He delivered a version of this essay as a lecture at Reed College and at the University of Portland in March.*

ing. That may not sound like a startling technological breakthrough, but thanks to computers, we are now able to count with unprecedented speed and thoroughness. Last August, for example, a computer programmer named John Matherly sent a simple “Are you there?” message to every device with a direct, public connection to the Internet. Within five hours, about 400 million machines responded, and after twelve hours of analysis, he was able to draw

a map of their locations around the world. Imagine trying to contact, count, and map all the people in the world by yourself; because they aren’t (yet) all connected to the Internet, you wouldn’t be likely to live long enough to finish.

Counting has changed the world before. Consider Europe and America in the two or three centuries before 1750, when society had a structure that was still half-feudal. Government taxes were collected by private indi-

viduals, who kept a cut for themselves. No matter how excellent a soldier's performance, he couldn't hope for a career as an officer unless he bought his way in. Men in public life were extremely touchy about their honor: if a reputation was slighted, the libeled party had to exchange pistol shots with his libeler at dawn, or else forfeit his social standing. In *The Institutional Revolution*, Douglas W. Allen argues that these peculiar conventions made economic sense in their day. Because standards of measurement were inconsistent and record-keeping was haphazard, it wasn't possible to know from a distance precisely what someone else was up to. The best way to keep a person from slacking was to let him skim a little, and the best way to keep him from cheating was to make the occasional exposure of dishonor a matter of life and death. In such a world, loyalty mattered more than talent; Voltaire wasn't kidding when he wrote that "it pays to shoot an admiral from time to time to encourage the others."

And then, between 1750 and 1850, everything changed. Lengths and weights became standardized; time-keeping mechanisms were improved and clocks became widely distributed; bureaucracies took charge of record-keeping. People stopped leaning so heavily on trust when the new technologies made it easier to verify. It was no longer necessary to shoot the person who claimed your hand was in the cookie jar once it became possible to show him, instead, an up-to-this-morning inventory of the cookies.

Today's breakthrough in counting is at least as radical as the one that took place at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, and we now find ourselves in the process of adjusting our social norms to the new transparency of our actions. We are also in the process of fighting over the terms of that adjustment. We fight about whether to replace the personal judgment of teachers with standardized curricula and frequent testing, whether it's ethical for employers to track the keystrokes and body movements of workers, whether we're comfortable with retailers having the intimate knowledge of ourselves that they're able to piece together from

our purchasing histories, and whether we trust our governments with the power to monitor our phone calls and emails. We haven't yet had a good fight about the intrusion of counting into the life of literature, however. Maybe we should.

At the end of 1818, John Keats began a long letter to George and Georgiana Keats, his brother and his sister-in-law, who were trekking down the Ohio River toward Louisville, Kentucky. No telegraph cable yet spanned the Atlantic, and the Keatses depended on private shipping companies to carry their ink-on-paper messages. Transit was slow. A few years earlier, the United States and Great Britain had ended the War of 1812 by signing a peace treaty in Ghent, in modern-day Belgium, but official notification didn't reach New Orleans for almost two months. In the interval, Andrew Jackson fought a bloody military campaign that a telegram would have rendered superfluous.

Measuring by the delay in their messages, Keats and his brother's family were farther from each other than it may be possible for people today to be. The poet suggested an unconventional way of bridging the distance. "I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o'clock," he proposed. "You read one at the same time, and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room."

I'd suggest that Keats was only half joking. In his poetry, after all, he associated literature with the power to transcend time and space, writing, for example, that George Chapman's translation of Homer made him think of the first glimpse that the Spanish conquistador Cortés had had, centuries earlier, of the vast Pacific Ocean. Keats returned to the idea of a book-mediated connection in a letter written about a year later to his lover, Fanny Brawne. "Do not send any more of my books home," he wrote on February 24, 1820, after tuberculosis had confined him to bed in Hampstead for three weeks. "I have a great pleasure in the thought of you looking on them."

There's something mystical about these passages. If Keats wasn't in the room with Brawne, he couldn't know for certain at any given moment whether she was looking at his books. He couldn't know which pages she turned, or how quickly. In fact, he would have had to take her word for it that she looked at his books at all. But he maintained nonetheless that he felt real pleasure when he thought of her reading his books. The simile in Keats's letter to his brother and sister-in-law is a strange one, and worth repeating: "As near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room." "Blind" because presumably Keats and his brother's family wouldn't be able to see each other, but "in the same room" because somehow they would be able to feel each other's presence.

What does it take to believe in such a communion? I think it requires the belief that reading, or at least a certain kind of reading, is sensuous, invisible, and soulful. Each instance of this kind of reading is unique. In its ideal form, it occurs on a plane that is oblique to the physical location of the people doing it, even when they happen to be in the same room.

This isn't to say that the particular bodies of the readers are irrelevant. If they were, then the communion could be reduced to the content of the text being shared, and Keats wasn't offering to mail his brother and sister-in-law a copy of Shakespeare's plays. The hope, in his half-joke, is that Shakespeare's words would call out a response in their souls, as instantiated in their bodies, that resonated so strongly with the response called out by the same words in his soul, as instantiated in his body, that he and his relatives would feel connected.

A year and a half ago, my husband and I went on vacation. We took a lot of pictures, as one does, and uploaded a batch to Facebook. After we got back to New York, my husband had lunch with his friend Peter Mendelsund, a book designer, as he does almost every week. Mendelsund told my husband that he really liked our vacation pictures.

"If you liked them, how come you didn't 'like' them?" my husband asked.

"I thought I did 'like' them," Mendelsund replied.

"One or two," my husband said accusingly.

By the end of the day, Mendelsund had "liked" several dozen more.

"But you missed a couple," my husband called to tell him.

I suspect that my husband, like Keats, was only half joking. Thanks to the mediation of our social lives by computers, we have become so habituated to having evidence of the mental states of other people that we no longer quite believe in those mental states when evidence is lacking. If George Keats didn't "like" Shakespeare, did he really like him? Pics or it didn't happen. John Keats couldn't have known which pages of his books Fanny Brawne turned. But we live in a world in which e-book retailers do know which pages their customers turn. In December 2014, the bookseller Kobo reported that although Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* was its ninth-highest seller in Great Britain that year, only 28.2 percent of purchasers got to the end of it.

Is it still possible to believe in a literary communion that takes place in silence and at a distance, and that leaves behind no evidence of any kind?

One temptation, when a thing is countable, is to imagine that instances of it are interchangeable. The average, rather than the ideal, becomes the archetype. There's little point in counting, after all, if you can't take the mental shortcut of assuming that the aspects of a thing that can't be counted don't matter. That is the basic trade-off at the heart of economics, which treats human desire as more or less fungible, even though most of us experience desire as particular and various. In exchange for this procrustean simplification, economics acquires a powerful predictive capacity. There are signs that the humanities today envy that capacity and are ready to accept a similar simplification.

If you think that works of literature are fungible, though, it begins to seem

a little silly to believe that a particular book could speak to you personally. Wouldn't another do just as well? In *Zealot*, the religious-studies scholar Reza Aslan pointed out that Jesus was one of a number of Aramaic-speaking magician-messiah figures with a revolutionary message in first-century Jerusalem. Aslan argued that it was reasonable to assume that Jesus resembled his peers, and suggested that an amalgamated portrait of these magician-messiahs would be tantamount to a portrait of Jesus. The trouble is that even though such an assumption might be sensible in economics, it isn't quite safe in history, and in religion it won't do at all. Christianity, even in its mildest, least doctrinal forms, involves the belief that Jesus was an outlier—not only unique in his day but unique for all time. People believe something similar about great works of literature, or at least they used to. In an essay that argues tacitly, and somewhat embarrassingly, for his own greatness, Wordsworth wrote that whereas bad popular poetry is immortal as a species—it bolts up and dies out, and is replaced by poetry just as bad and just as popular and just as ephemeral a day later—a good poem is immortal as an individual.

Under the old dispensation, an act of reading, too, could be special. If we no longer believe in this possibility, the humanities classroom looks awfully inefficient. Why grant novice readers a meatspace conversation about literature with an expert when expert knowledge can be broadcast cheaply over a computer network? The luxury doesn't make sense unless learning about literature is understood to consist of something more than the transmission of data. It's only if a conversation between a teacher and student is understood to create meaning, rather than merely transfer it, that an opportunity seems to be lost.

A second temptation, in a counted world, is to imagine that no single instance of a thing matters—that the individual case is no more than a rounding error. In the old myth, by contrast, it was possible to believe that a work of literature succeeded if it reached just one person for whom it was a key. A couple of years ago,

when I was trying to convince the administrators of the New York Public Library not to knock the bookshelves out of their landmark research building at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street in Manhattan, one of the library's publicists pointed out that in the previous year, patrons asked to see only a minute proportion of the books stored there—only 300,000 out of roughly 4 million, or about 7.5 percent. It was impossible to know whether this number was higher or lower than in earlier years—the library had only recently finished computerizing its circulation system—and in public, I argued that a number without a context couldn't plausibly justify a change in policy. But in private, I had to admit that I found the number strangely demoralizing. Someday it will probably become possible to estimate a book's chance of finding not its one true reader but any reader at all.

My dismay was naïve; the unreadness of library books has been noticed before. "No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes, than a publick library," Samuel Johnson wrote in *The Rambler* in 1751. Lorin Stein, the editor of *The Paris Review*, has even said that he finds it consoling to visit a bookstore in much the way that it's consoling to visit a cemetery: there's a peace to be had in knowing that someday we'll all be forgotten. Quantifying these melancholy convictions, however, brings them home, at least to me, in a new way. You start to wonder whether there's a back-of-the-napkin calculation that could determine once and for all whether the creative effort is worth it.

The third, and perhaps most crucial, temptation that besets those who count is to equate the value of a thing with the popularity of it. You may like a singer, but if he were really a genius, wouldn't more people be downloading his song? It might seem to you that a reporter has exposed a grave threat to the republic, but why aren't more people clicking on her article?

Writers have long protested against measuring worth by popularity, as H. J. Jackson recounts in *Those Who Write for Immortality*, a

new study of the mechanics of literary fame. The Roman poet Horace, Jackson notes, was frankly elitist, writing that "'Tis enough if the knights applaud me." Elitism remained unabashed as late as 1625, when Francis Bacon wrote of praise, "If it be from the common people, it is commonly false and naught." The rhetoric shifted in the eighteenth century, as people began to doubt that social hierarchy was a positive good in itself. David Hume suggested in his 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste" that "durable admiration" was a better index of aesthetic value than the momentary good opinion of any set of readers. In the preface to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson argued that the best judgment of literary value was gradual and cumulative. Literary merit was the sort of thing that had to be discovered by experiment and assessed by means of comparisons, Johnson wrote, and "no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem."

Hume and Johnson made it sound as though they were taking the judgment of literary value out of the hands of a sociopolitical elite and submitting it to an impersonal process—time, or maybe history. In 1919, T. S. Eliot called his vision of the process "tradition." "What happens when a new work of art is created," Eliot wrote,

is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.

One imagines a Greek temple, glowing at night, whose columns are somehow living beings—daunting, ethereal, austere, yet not completely unwelcoming if one happens to be wearing just the right peplum.

To believe in the old myth of literature, it wasn't absolutely necessary to subscribe to Eliot's fantasy. But some notion of a literary canon was essential to the ideal of soulful reading, because not all texts repaid soulful attention. If one was building up one's

soul, one wanted to know about as many texts as possible that did. There needed to be a way to pass news of them along.

**I**n my imagination, at least, the transmission happened along the following lines: The canon was entrusted to an elite, but it wasn't necessarily coterminous with any particular sociopolitical elite. Anyone who could persuade another person to listen to her literary opinions belonged. It was a kind of freemasonry, crossing time as well as space. Though some communications were transmitted instantly, others might not reach another member for years, perhaps centuries.

Within this elite, knowledge of literary tradition was respected because it gave a reader a greater familiarity with what literature was capable of—a wider range for comparison. In most cases, a professor of literature belonged, as did a newspaper reviewer, even though the taste of each probably struck the other as disfigured somewhat by the mental habits of his profession. A publisher, by virtue of choosing which titles to print or reprint, was eligible, as was a bookseller, who exercised a vote when he stocked a title. A reader took part when he made a purchase that supported the publisher in his choice and the bookseller in his seconding of it, and he voted again when he recommended the book to a friend. I worked in the town library when I was in high school, and one of the librarians, a former nun, used to wander through the stacks from time to time and save her favorite books from being discarded by stamping them with false due dates. She, too, was participating.

It was impossible, in the old days, to quantify exactly the power of any one voice in this imaginary elite. A stray remark by someone's uncle might be decisive, if it led a young listener to a hand-me-down copy of a book that she fell for so hard that she was inspired, years later, to write a critical essay—or even, perhaps, a new work of literature—that cemented the book's connection to the living tradition. In other words, it was possible to imagine, with

E. M. Forster, that "the final test of a novel"—or any book—"will be our affection for it."

Or rather, posterity's affection. For better or worse, it wasn't possible to know posterity's verdict in advance. To writers who found it hard to live with the uncertainty, Eliot advised writing with a "historical sense," in the apparent belief that a style that was knowing about the literary tradition would be more likely to be welcomed into it. Wordsworth, more boldly, suggested that a writer with a future should expect controversy in the present, and even welcome it. "Every author," Wordsworth wrote, "as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed."

Jackson shows in *Those Who Write for Immortality* that a reputation like Wordsworth's was in fact shaped not by his literary merit alone but also by quirks of publishing history, unforeseeable shifts in readerly taste, and acts of advocacy and partisanship. If she could travel back in time two centuries, she would advise a young Romantic poet to choose a house suitable for conversion into a shrine, to instill devotion in younger relatives who would one day manage the literary estate, to cultivate a personal myth contradictory enough to keep biographers occupied, and to write short lyrics because long narrative verse was about to go out of style.

Jackson considers the canon a bit of a sham, and potentially dangerous. It's true that the informality of canon formation probably did make it easier to exclude writers on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, but Jackson is concerned for the most part with less categorical biases, and I'm not persuaded that her exposure of the gears, and of the grit that has sometimes compromised the gears, puts the myth entirely out of commission. Although she tries to identify poets who deserve a higher place in literary history than they have received, she admits to misgivings about one of her candidates—Barry Cornwall—and compares the work of another—Robert Bloomfield—to the text of greeting cards. She seems most

enthusiastic about rehabilitating Leigh Hunt, a mentor of Keats's, but much of her praise is for Hunt's personality; her description of his poetic language is brief and general. It turns out to be difficult to alter the canon. Jackson explains that those who are passed over by literary history are at a disadvantage because "their more successful counterparts were used to establish standards" according to which we now make literary judgments—an explanation that uncannily resembles Wordsworth's claim that a great writer creates the taste by which he is to be enjoyed. Through its resistance to being dislodged, the criterion of literary merit seems to offer some proof of its existence.

Moreover, if Jackson were to prove one of her claimants worthy, she wouldn't thereby overthrow the canon. She would refine it. The canon has long been understood to be an imperfect and continuous approximation. Jackson quotes a warning that William Godwin issued in 1797: "The most which a successful author can pretend to, is to deliver up his works as a subject for eternal contention." Instability is part of the myth's appeal, solacing authors who feel underappreciated—who hope that the judgment of posterity in, say, 2015 might be revised come 2050. The canon is a mystical sum, which can never be tallied; its only true index is written in living and fallible hearts.

**T**his myth of unknowability is being replaced today by an illusion of certainty. As I write this sentence, the Amazon sales rank of John Keats's *Selected Letters* is 796,426, and the new Oxford Authors edition of William Wordsworth's poetry and prose has a rank of 2,337,250. It's hard to look away from such numbers, which are objective even when the data that they summarize is incomplete and the formula that generates them has been kept secret. Numbers are easier to compare than opinions, which may be why opinions now are so often accompanied by a rating of one to five stars.

What happens to the canon in such a world? Maybe it lapses into no more than a list of books with high network externalities—books

that others in your peer group are reading and that it will benefit you to read, too, because they are more likely to come up in conversation and serve as opportunities for you to show off and forge connections. Or maybe the canon becomes what an algorithm guesses you might like, through a Bayesian analysis of preferences that you and others have already registered. Let the computer run its algorithm, and you will, by some lights, be getting rid of literary criticism's last few sticks of Biedermeier furniture. The preferences that the algorithm taps into are the result of human judgments about literary value, and the algorithm no doubt draws on more of them, more systematically, than any member of my fading freemasonry was ever likely to have been able to. So why does the algorithm leave me uneasy? The Internet companies that manage these recommendation lists are free to sell spots on them to the highest bidder, but leave that aside as an obvious corruption, which could in theory be remedied. What bothers me, I think, is that with an algorithm, humans are cut out of the loop by computer processing of their own earlier judgments—like voters in California preempted by election predictions based on votes cast on the East Coast, except in this case, the voters have somehow been preempted by themselves. Living memory has the power to shape and to create, but artificial memory only repeats what it was told.

"Where wisdom once was, quantification will now be," Leon Wieseltier, formerly of *The New Republic*, now a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*, wrote in a recent lament. *And get off my lawn*, someone on the Internet inevitably jeers whenever quantification is questioned. There's something democratic about numbers, after all. Resistance to them, in the field of literary judgment, implies a belief that appreciation by some readers is worth more than appreciation by others. The sophisticated understanding today is that "highbrow" is just another market segment. Whether a show gets renewed depends on its ratings and ad sales, not the caliber of its audience's taste.

Aren't reviews on Amazon and ratings on Goodreads the voice of the people speaking? Wordsworth raised a similar question, rather defensively, at the end of his essay decrying popularity as a criterion of literature. It would be slander, he insisted, for anyone to claim that he didn't respect the literary judgment of the people. He just didn't happen to acquiesce in the judgments being made by the people at the time he was writing.

I sympathize. It can still be hard for a writer to make such an acquiescence. Here's an excerpt from the first Amazon review I ever received:

Crain is a prissy snob and NYT regular who has written two books one of which is out of print. These volumes will find their place among the unread and unremembered exercises in effete yuppie lifestyle decoration. . . . Trash only of interest to sheltered Yale frat boys going through they're [sic] mandatory Feminist/Homosexual postmodern semiotics discourse potty training.

Hume and Johnson were right about judgment maturing with time, at any rate. The review stung when I first read it, thirteen years ago, but these days I'm strangely fond of it.

However politically awkward it may be to say so, of course the appreciation of some readers is worth more than that of others. It's because numbers are democratic that they are usually accurate about existing popular preferences and usually wrong about the ultimate value of literary works. The opinions on the Internet today are a modern form of those that circulated, informally and rather more chaotically, in my imaginary freemasonry. Indeed, the literary judgments that appear on the blog of an avid reader, say, or as a contribution to an online literary review that is developing a coherent sensibility, such as *Public Books*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, or *Open Letters Monthly*, strike me as the old myth's forlorn hope in a new realm. It's when online companies solicit and host opinions so as to be able easily to quantify and aggregate them that the damage happens.

Hume suggested the nature of the damage in “Of the Standard of Taste.” Numbers and counting may belong to the province of reason, but Hume argued that reason is of limited use in judging literature. It’s impossible, he believed, to deduce the laws of good writing, for one thing. Reason might at first appear capable of producing a few generalizations, but “when critics come to particulars,” he warned, “this seeming unanimity vanishes.” All reason can do is deduce the qualities of a good critic—a delicate palate, practice, a faculty for making comparisons, freedom from prejudice, and good sense—and then conduct an empirical debate about which critics possess those qualities. He believed, in short, that literature knows itself only through critics, and that the critics have to be evaluated. I would argue that only a community can conduct such an evaluation, and that the most common vehicle for such evaluation is, or at least used to be, the book review.

**B**ook reviews are usually thought of as evaluations of books, not of the people who write them, but the judgments involved in a review are in fact taking place on several planes and along several angles. It’s impossible for a critic to judge a book unless she holds it to a standard, which may take the form of a rule, such as “Language should be no fussier than what’s needed to convey its message,” or of a personal touchstone, such as Sybille Bedford’s *A Legacy*. But where does the authority for the standard come from? Another reviewer might choose a different rule, such as “Language should dazzle,” or a different touchstone, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A further challenge is that literature changes, and the standards for judging it must therefore also change. I believe that the critic appeals for her authority to the community that she shares with her readers—a community that in the days of print was largely constituted by the writers for and readers of a particular periodical—and that the community chooses its standards through conversation.

The conversation is asymmetric: the critic proposes, and the reader—

often through his representative, the critic’s editor—disposes. In every review, a critic is proposing both a judgment of a work of literature and, sometimes explicitly, a standard for judgment. In every review, a critic asserts, at least tacitly, what she believes literature to be. Her definition may be a little different from the one she proposed last week, and it may be a little different from one proposed by another reviewer at the same publication, but there will usually be a family resemblance. The critic is not free to redefine literature at whim. Readers would exit the community if the critic’s understanding were to drift so far from theirs that her reviews no longer helped to identify what they sought in literature. In the old days, it was the responsibility of editors to forestall the exit of readers by dropping such critics. But a critic who flunked out of one community of readers might be welcomed by another, because every publication had different standards of judgment. *The New Republic* might be willing to pan a book celebrated in *The New York Times Book Review*; in the old days, it often did.

The Internet has damaged the coherence of this system in a number of ways. By undermining the profitability of newspapers, the Internet destroyed most local book-reviewing communities in America. But the more general problem now is that literary judgment is usually severed from the context that gave rise to it. Online, the community who reads a review often has no borders. Many readers arrive at online reviews by way of Twitter or Facebook, not because they devotedly visit a homepage, and they aren’t likely to reflect on their loyalty to the publisher of the review. They aren’t, in most cases, subscribers. No one ever canceled his connection to the Internet because he read something on it that he disagreed with. It is one thing to conduct a tacit conversation about literary standards with tens or even hundreds of thousands of subscribers, and it is another to conduct such a conversation with all speakers of the English language with an Internet connection. There is no longer any exit. No reader can get out, and no critic can be kicked out. You may feel

that Amazon reviews are so unreliable that you’d rather not read them, and you are free to declare that you’ll never read one again. Good luck with that. A particular customer review may strike you as so mean-spirited and off topic that you think Amazon should take it down. Good luck with that too.

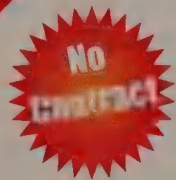
Most reviews today, cut off from the communities that once fostered and disciplined them, have no authority. “All sentiment is right,” Hume wrote, “because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself.” A market can be driven by sentiments alone, and a marketplace can be exploited with great efficiency by those who are able to count sentiments and analyze them. But literature was supposed to be able to do more than fulfill wishes and confirm preferences.

Literature will survive if readers declare war on counting, if they insist that literature is defined by the judgment of the ideal critic and not the average one, and if they are able to build new communities of critics and readers with borders that are porous and expansive but nonetheless meaningful. “For this week past,” Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne, on July 4, 1820, “I have been employed in marking the most beautiful passages in Spenser, intending it for you, and comforting myself in being somehow occupied to give you however small a pleasure.” The communion imagined by Keats here is on a continuum with those he imagined in his other letters to Brawne or to his brother, but in this case no mysticism is required. As soon as Keats was healthy enough, he would be able to visit Brawne and share with her the Spenser verses that he had marked. But I wonder if the sharing, when it took place, would have been able to bring him as much pleasure as his imagination of the sharing had. Or to put it another way, I wonder if what he would have most enjoyed, in the act of sharing, was his imagination of Brawne’s pleasure—which, even if she were sitting beside him, would have been invisible to him—and his imagined perception that it brought their souls together. The deepest literary pleasures, even when they involve others, are a little dreamy and lonely. ■

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## NEW BOOKS

By Christine Smallwood



In August 1965, Andy Warhol popped two Desoxyn and set out with his Philips tape recorder to capture a day in the life of Factory superstar Ondine. (The two had met a few years earlier, at an orgy, when the young actor, irritated that Warhol wasn't "involved" enough, arranged for him to be thrown out of the proceedings.) Ondine was hard to keep up with: Warhol made it through only twelve hours of clubs, cabs, and parties before giving up and going home. They didn't get around to taping another twelve hours until 1967, and the following year a group of women—Gerard Malanga's secretary, Velvet Underground drummer Moe Tucker, and some high-school girls—completed the transcription. It was a 600-page mess of typos, and, according to his biographer Victor Bockris, Warhol loved it so much that he read it six times. A, *a Novel* was published

without correction. It testified to two realities: Ondine's life and the erratum-ridden reproduction of it.

A few months before Warhol first hit the record button, Linda Rosenkrantz had already begun to write by mechanical proxy. *TALK* (New York Review Books, \$14.95, nybooks.com) is the novel she sifted from a summer vacation in East Hampton. Unlike Warhol, she believed in editing: she pared down around twenty-five voices to a cast of three and assembled their best lines, scrubbed of "ums" and "uhs," into something resembling a narrative arc. Rosenkrantz's subsequent career included a memoir, a book about Hollywood, a history of the telegraph, and a syndicated column. (She also cofounded nameberry.com, a website whose mission is "to help you find the baby name you'll love for a lifetime.") But she never published anything like *Talk* again.

*Talk* is a documentary as well as a performance—all the characters knew that they were being taped. There's Marsha (the name Rosenkrantz gives herself), a would-be writer with "a serious job" who records and transcribes the conversations; Emily, an acting student and blackout drunk; and Vincent, a gay painter and the love of Marsha's life. All are about thirty years old. Key plot points include the preparation and consumption of salads, a fight between Vinnie and Marsha, and that one time somebody someone slept with walks by without saying hi. (Emily also goes to rehab, briefly, an event treated more or less on par with the salads.) Favored topics of conversation include feelings, LSD, parties, therapy, books, food, fathers, art, and sex. "It all comes down to the same old problem," Marsha sighs, "being a woman alone." A good man is so hard to find! There isn't *anyone* on the beach whom they haven't already met. Even Marsha's psychoanalyst, also summering in the Hamptons, admits as much.

Billed paradoxically as "a novel in transcript form," the faux-naïf experiment of *Talk* is at once audacious and lazy, much like its characters. Reality-fetishizing contemporary fiction self-consciously leverages the history of the novel, but *Talk* wholly forgoes description, interior monologue, and free indirect discourse. Its gambit has more to do with conceptual art, and with group psychology, than with fiction. Even its interest in language is only incidental—the pleasure of hearing oneself speak, and spoken of. Our trio relishes a sweat-lodge intimacy built on popping one another's psychic zits. At the end of the summer, Emily wants to know whether she is closer to Marsha than Vinnie is. Marsha punts, then swerves. "But in the end, do I really give a shit about either of you?" she asks. "Do I give a shit about anything? I don't think I do." Emily doesn't take it personally. She knows how to play therapist. "I think it's very healthy that you're worried about this," she says.

The girls like games, especially name games. In one, they have to guess the identity of a person they know:

EMILY: Here's a good question for you to ask—would this person take tranquilizers or pep-ups?

MARSHA: No, that's not allowed—you have to ask what *kind* of tranquilizer he would be. What kind?

EMILY: Bufferin.

MARSHA: If this person were an object like to make love on, what would it be?

EMILY: Very good question—okay, gynecologist's table.

MARSHA: I hate this person.

In another game, they choose, rapid-fire, whom they would rather sleep with: Jack Ruby or Lee Oswald? Hoagy Carmichael or Stokely Carmichael? Jonas Mekas or Gregory Markopoulos? Jules or Jim? "The first night is the only time I *do* care about them," Marsha says of her conquests, "because it's a new name on my list."

Marsha starts worrying on the drive back to the city. All summer long she woke up at seven to "write a book," but what did she miss while she was typing? What did she really *do*? "I'm beginning to think that everything in my life happens offstage, it's all reverberations and echoes and filters, and that's exactly what my book is too," she frets. It's true, but so is what Vinnie says:

I think all great art comes from people's inabilities to do what they want to do.... You're making something new and valid out of your own defect, which is what all great art does. Do you think the Beatles knew how to drive a car?

**T**he young are strange and new, but they're not so hard to get to know. All you have to do is listen. It's easy—so easy that I cannot imagine why Christy Wampole, a professor of French and the author of *THE OTHER SERIOUS: ESSAYS FOR THE NEW AMERICAN GENERATION* (Harper, \$25.99, harpercollins.com), hasn't tried it. In her disquisition on "The Great American Irony Binge," she poses a riddle whose earnestness does nothing to mitigate its fatuity:

As a Gen-Xer, I wonder how it must be to grow up in this environment today. What does it feel like to be in high school, for example, where your life is constantly available for comment online? ... Can you ever say how you really feel, using your own name?

Wampole doesn't answer her question about what life is like for others, but she's happy to share what it's like for her. Some will chalk this up to the self-investigatory mandate of the essay, but Wampole's speculative humblebrags smack of bad faith. "I shy intuitively away from all of today's necessary posturing," she writes, "knowing all the while that if I were in high school now, I'd probably just shut up and adapt."

*The Other Serious* escalates the war on irony that Wampole first launched in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*. She describes contemporary culture as a contest between "The Bad Serious," which covers everything from apocalyptic thinking to Internet trolls to mass shootings, and "irony," which she traces from the ancient haze of the 1990s (decade of her *bêtes noires* *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and *Beavis and Butt-head*) to the much-theorized hipster and his much-theorized mustache. (Cultural historians of the future will doubtless be less flummoxed by turn-of-the-century facial coiffure than by our obsession with it.) Irony, for Wampole, is epitomized in online comments, which are clever, flippant, and mean. She does not dispute that "everything is relative" or that "what we believe in today will be annulled tomorrow," but she insists that "there are scores of other ways to express or resist this state of affairs" without reducing "civilization" to "one big punch line." She proposes a "nuanced management of the ironic binge, a recalibration of our sensors," achievable by reading *The Idiot*, sitting by a creek, or spending time with children or the disabled. Ultimately she advocates for what she calls "The Other Serious," a state of mind that is calm, attentive, moderate, and joyful.

These are virtues, and they are worthy of a better spokesperson. Wampole condescends to the reader. She substitutes etymology for argument. She celebrates nature as a pure antidote to the corruptions of society. She identifies plausible symptoms of this corruption—careerist undergrad-

uates, a distracted populace, the clean lines of Apple computers, comedies of "awkwardness"—but her diagnoses are inadequate. She mistakes material conditions for collective failures of character. "I know so many people who listened to tons of new music in high school, who filled sketchbooks with drawings, who wrote little poems in private," she writes. "As grown-ups, they've abandoned all that essential stuff to watch TV.... Do a favor for your future elderly self: make cool things you can dig out of a box and say, 'I made this.'"

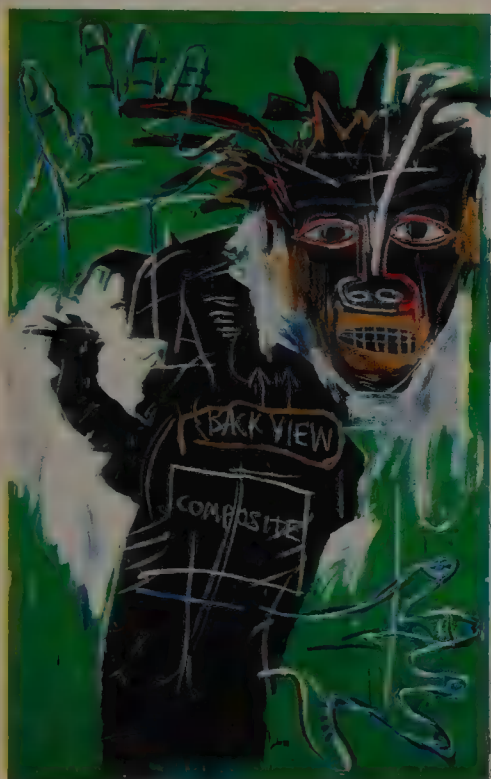
I wonder: Why *don't* more people come home after eight or twelve hours of work—work that just might involve doing things that they consider meaningful—and unwind by writing poetry or making "cool things"? If this is serious, give me irony, mustaches and all.

**I**ronists since Socrates have courted misunderstanding. Sometime in 1974 or 1975, Television bassist Richard Hell wrote PLEASE KILL ME ON a T-shirt and gave it to his bandmate Richard Lloyd to wear when they played upstairs at Max's Kansas City. "These fans gave me this really psychotic look," Lloyd remembers in the oral history *Please Kill Me*. "They looked as deep into my eyes as they possibly could—and said, 'Are you serious?' ... They were just looking at me, with that wild-eyed look, and I thought, I'm not wearing this shirt again."

If you were living below 14th Street in the mid-1970s, you had reasons to be on your guard. FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD, said the papers, and for a while New York seemed like it might. The underground punk and no-wave scenes—which involved music, graffiti, writing, film, television, and fashion—were daily challenges to a status quo of crime, corruption, and white flight. As the film scholar Joan Hawkins writes in the introduction to *DOWNTOWN FILM AND TV CULTURE: 1975-2001* (University of Chicago, \$50, press.uchicago.edu), "the Downtown Art Scene was perhaps the last historical movement that believed deeply that one could make a political difference simply by intervening in society's spectacle."

Hawkins's anthology of scholarly essays covers the visual culture of no-

wave film, punk cinema, the cinema of transgression, queer film, ACT UP, and public-access television shows. The book has chapters on Beth B, Spalding Gray, Todd Haynes, and Nick Zedd. There are readings of Amos Poe's nouvelle vague-inspired *Unmade Beds* (1976), which stars Patti Astor and Debbie Harry's legs; Poe and Ivan Kral's quasi concert documentary *Blank Generation* (1976); and Richard Kern's *The Right Side of My Brain* (1985), featuring a feral Lydia Lunch. Downtown media, diverse as



it was, had a common sensibility: an intentional amateurism, a gritty anti-sentimentality, and a love of B movies, horror, punk, and camp. The long take, inherited from Warhol and Antonioni, gave many of the scene's films what Hawkins describes as "a certain sense of alienation and ennui." Images were made with one eye on postmodern theory and the other on the street. While some directors aimed to shock the sheep out of complacency with rough montage and didacticism, the best work was oblique, even a little unfinished, such as Bette Gordon's *Variety* (1984). Written by Kathy Acker and including Nan Goldin in a small part, *Variety* is about a woman named Christine who takes a job selling tickets at a Times Square porn theater. Released during the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, the film is not re-

ducible to a "pro-sex" or "anti-porn" position. Christine's problem is this: that she is a woman, and the world was made for men.

In 1972, FCC rules mandated non-commercial access to the airwaves, and over the next two decades artists responded with programs about feminism, crime, grant funding, and AIDS. Kiki Smith and Ellen Cooper made *Cave Girls*. Jaime Davidovich was behind *The Live! Show*. Liza Bear's *Communications Update* featured investigative reporting, science programming, and artist interviews. *Paper Tiger TV* analyzed corporate media. (One of its segments featured Donna Haraway reading *National Geographic*.) Sometimes stations aired tapes that were mailed in anonymously. Sometimes people just hung out. Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* (1978–82), was an hour-long hang to end all hangs where Chris Stein, Debbie Harry, Fab 5 Freddy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and whoever else was around played music, told jokes, smoked weed, and broadcast the scene.

At the time, many of the artists who made television shows did not own televisions, so the Kitchen, an experimental performance space, held bi-monthly screenings of cable-access shows. Today some of the films and programs are available digitally, but not all of them. Despite downtown's aversion to hierarchy, a canon of sorts has emerged. Like all canons, it's built on exclusion; we know certain names only because other names have been erased, or misplaced.

We do have one example of what the downtown scene thought worthy of canonizing: Anthology Film Archives' Essential Cinema Repertory, a list of 330 "sublime achievements" selected by Jonas Mekas and four others. The idea had been to continually revise the repertory, but it hasn't been updated since 1974. Of course, even Essential Cinema doesn't tell us what it was like to see *Zorns Lemma* or *Sunrise* or *The Triumph of the Will* in the 1970s—it only gives us a chance to know what it's like to see them today. The very notion of downtown—like "the Sixties" or "the Nineties" or the twenty-first-century "Teens"—is perpetually under construction. We have the tapes, but they sound different every time we play them. ■

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# NEW TELEVISION

By Daniel Mendelsohn

In the final seconds of *Wolf Hall*—the six-part BBC adaptation of Hilary Mantel’s best-selling novels of high-stakes intrigue at the court of Henry VIII—the camera lingers on the terrified face of a man who has just achieved total political triumph. The man is Thomas Cromwell, Henry’s chief minister, a blacksmith’s son whose improbable rise to power has just been capped by the latest of his machinations on behalf of his monarch: the execution of Anne Boleyn, Henry’s second queen, on trumped-up charges of adultery and treason. (Her real crime, as everyone knew, was her failure to provide a male heir.) Never mind that Cromwell had engineered the marriage to Anne in the first place. The perfect underling, he smoothly bends his ethics to his master’s whims.

Fresh from Anne’s execution, Cromwell seems to float (the scene is shot in dreamlike slow motion) down the length of a magnificent gallery in the palace toward a beaming Henry, who awaits him with arms outstretched in jubilation. As the king enfolds his minister in a bear hug, we see Henry’s exultant expression; he’s got what he wanted at last. Then the camera sneaks behind Henry’s back to give us a glimpse of Cromwell’s face, the lower half of which is pointedly obscured by the king’s massive arm: the minister is being literally as well as metaphorically smothered by the autocrat. The percussion-heavy music builds to a climax, and we see Cromwell’s green eyes staring horrified into space—into the future. At this moment we realize what he has just realized: from the heights of success, the only direction he can go is down. As, indeed, was the case. With-

in a few years it was Cromwell’s own head that rolled, after an attempt to orchestrate yet another marriage for Henry fell apart.

It was hard not to think of the perils of political success, and of the pleasures of political drama, as the recent television season came to an end—and the



frenetic jockeying for the 2016 election began. Two of the great successes on TV this year have been shows about American presidential politics; in each, an underdog rises to power as relentlessly—and Pyrrhically—as Cromwell did. One is a drama: *HOUSE OF CARDS* (Netflix), about the revenge-fueled ascent of Frank Underwood, a Machiavellian congressman from the South, whose good-old-boy affability conceals a heart of ice. (The show’s first episode opens with him

killing a neighbor’s dog with his bare hands: *that’s* how cold he is. When he pushes a pesky journalist in front of an oncoming subway train in the next season, you don’t even blink.) At the beginning of the first season, Underwood is passed over for a cabinet position he covets by the president he helped get elected—a betrayal that inspires him to concoct a vengeance of fantastic complexity. Among other things, he finesses a gubernatorial election to force the vice president to resign, allowing Underwood to replace him, and subsequently creates a scandal

that causes the president to leave office. By the third season, which was released in February, Underwood has lied, cheated, cajoled, and murdered his way into the Oval Office.

If *House of Cards* holds up a cynical, only slightly distorted mirror to the ugly conning that makes power possible, the other big hit about a presidential aspirant, the sourly comic *VEEP* (HBO), satirizes the way in which ineptitude often seems to be rewarded in politics. Like Frank Underwood, *Veep*’s Selina Meyer is an underling who finds herself in the White House at the beginning of the new season (the show’s fourth, which ended in June). This being a comedy, Selina’s means of ascent are more or less the opposite of Frank’s: after three seasons of bumbling, babbling, and wisecracking herself into total irrelevance, she becomes president by pure accident, after her predecessor unexpectedly resigns. Thus far, she shows no sign that she’ll acquire any more gravitas as president than she had as *veep*. “Maybe we can put Afghanistan on eBay,” she tells her aides in the season’s first episode.

As different as these series are, their protagonists have both come to face what you might call the Cromwell problem: what happens when you finally get the power you’ve coveted for so long? Even more interestingly, the series are now facing that problem

themselves. When the engine of your drama has been a character's scheming for power, what happens when he or she finally gets it?

**T**he drama of the manipulative subordinate has been satisfying audiences since the beginnings of Western theater—to be precise, since the spring day in 458 B.C. when Aeschylus' *Oresteia* premiered in Athens. Like *House of Cards*, each play of the trilogy traces the course of an elaborately plotted revenge by someone who has been slighted or relegated to the political and social margins—someone who, during the course of the drama, seizes power and then uses it to punish personal and political enemies. (Horribly.) As the first play begins, Clytemnestra, the queen of Argos, still outraged that her husband, Agamemnon, sacrificed their daughter at the start of the Trojan War, has been waiting ten years for the fighting to end so that she can kill him at the very moment of his triumphal return. This she does, and that revenge plot sets in motion another. In the second play, the couple's son, Orestes—rightfully the king but long since rusticated by the shrewd Clytemnestra—infiltrates the palace incognito and slays his wayward mother and the lover with whom she usurped the throne. That murder, in turn, invites a vengeful pursuit in the third play by the supernatural Furies, who drive the boy-killer to madness. The plot of each drama takes the form of a literal plot—to murder, to punish, to avenge—on the part of an outsider who by the end of the play finds him- or herself the powerful person now being plotted against.

The appeal of this narrative is hardly restricted to the theater: the entire second half of Homer's *Odyssey* is little more than an elaborate revenge plot enacted by someone who, reduced to powerlessness by circumstance, slowly, violently works his way back into power. But the story line has proved particularly irresistible to dramatists.

In part, the popularity of tales about the ruthless (or, in comedy, hapless) acquisition of power has to do with our experience as citizens: these narratives reflect what we know, or at least suspect, to be the

distasteful and often illicit realities of politics and power. But there is, too, a deeper, psychological element. It's surely significant that many of the characters who have consistently seized the cultural imagination—and, whether we like to admit it or not, our sympathy—are twisted, wounded schemers: Clytemnestra and Richard III, Iago and Frank Underwood, all of whom share the same psychological DNA. (Andrew Davies, who wrote the 1990 BBC series on which *House of Cards* is based, acknowledged that he modeled the main character on Shakespeare's Richard.)

It's not hard to see why. Because we've all felt slighted in one way or another, because we've all had aspirations to rise to the top, these characters, with their outlandish bids for control, appeal to us far more than do the smug leaders, the complacent husbands, and the clueless consorts whom they ultimately topple. (It's no accident that in both *House of Cards* and *Veep*, the presidents replaced by the protagonists are bland ciphers: nobody identifies with *them*.) There's a point in *Richard III* when the nephew of the hunchbacked king—one of the "little princes" who are later murdered at Richard's command—slyly mocks his uncle's deformity. "You should bear me on your shoulders," the boy smirks, knowing full well that those shoulders can't carry anyone. Who in the audience, put in mind by that taunt of some past injury, some half-forgotten teasing, doesn't know what it feels like to want to strike back?

The striking back is the engine of the dramatic fun. Just as our identification with the conspirator's wounds provides a complicated pleasure, so, too, does the chillingly methodical vendetta, elaborated from scene to scene, provide a darker satisfaction—replicating, in the safe space of fiction, the inventive fantasies of vengeance in which most of us have occasionally indulged. The more elaborate the ruse, the better: hence the pleasure of Underwood's ascent, which plays out on the dramatic equivalent of a three-dimensional chessboard. A memorable conceit of Rowland V. Lee's *Tower of London* (1939), which was partly in-

spired by *Richard III*, gave arresting if rather campy visual life to this brand of revenge. Lee's Richard has a set of little dolls that he keeps in a secret cabinet in his chambers: each represents a relative or rival who stands between him and the throne. As the drama unfolds and he dispatches this or that sibling or nephew—by drowning them in barrels of wine, by more overtly violent means—he plucks a doll from the cabinet and tosses it into the fire.

The formula works just as well for comedy. Ten years after *Tower of London*, Ealing Studios took what was essentially the same plot and turned it into brilliant farce. In *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, the dispossessed scion of an aristocratic family inventively eliminates every relative who stands between him and the dukedom he seeks. (All of his rivals, from suffragettes to big-game hunters, are played with gleeful relish by Alec Guinness.)

That the conniving outsider is so central to tragedy and comedy alike should come as no surprise. For Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, intrigue and theater were connected at the genetic level. In that treatise, the philosopher identified plot as the most important element of a good drama; and a plot, he went on, consists of two complementary trajectories. First, there must be a "complication"—the Greek word is *dêsis*, which means a "binding" or "tying up in a knot." Then there has to be a "resolution," or *lysis*—a "loosening" or "untying." (The concept persists in our term "denouement," which literally means "unknotting.") Hence drama isn't really drama without scheming—without the ornery, complicating subterfuge at which resentful second bananas are so naturally adept.

**T**his is why I worried about *Veep* and *House of Cards* when their most recent seasons began. Now that the mechanism that drove the shows—the striving by the main characters to raise themselves above what the foulmouthed Selina Meyer bitterly refers to as the "shitty experience" of being outside the circle of power—has achieved its end, where could they go?

I suspect that *Veep* has a better chance of enduring. True, Selina Meyer's will to power and contempt for

other people are as absolute as Underwood's; the viciousness with which she denigrates her most devoted aide during an argument in Season 4 makes you forget, momentarily, that you are watching a comedy. ("What do you think you are?" she sneers. "You are *unimportant*, okay?... You are a middle-aged man who sanitizes my tweezers.") And yet the incompetence of the people who surround her—in the latest season, her aides provide her with the wrong draft of her first big speech to Congress, and she finds herself staring at a teleprompter that says FUTURE WHATEVER—acts as a kind of structural guarantee that this show will go on. Humiliation, it's worth remembering, is at the root of comedy: all the bungling keeps Selina humble—always striving, always struggling, no matter that she now, ostensibly, has total power and authority. And the striving, as Aristotle understood, is what moves drama forward.

But what of *House of Cards*? I've been a fan since the show began: for me, as (I suspect) for millions of others, there's a kind of relief in watching a political drama that mirrors the tawdriness of real-life politics even as it provides a Day-Glo escape from them. It's been hard, though, not to notice a note of everything-but-the-kitchen-sink desperation creeping in to the plotting this past season. The story lines have yo-yoed from diplomatic crises to the president's flirtation with a handsome young writer, from grandstanding Russian autocrats to jailhouse suicides by gay-rights advocates. But where's it going? Surveying this erratic landscape, it occurs to you to wonder whether, now that the deliciously nasty arc of Frank's ascent is complete, the show you're watching isn't becoming just a meaner version of *The West Wing*.

Or worse. In the final scene of Season 3, the greatest crisis facing President Underwood is that his steely wife may be leaving him. Was this, in the end, what all the conniving was for—to end up in a prime-time soap? Not for the first time in history, politics, or show business, the greatest danger of all may be success. ■

## JOY PLOY

### The dismal science of human optimization

By Kristin Dombek

Discussed in this essay:

*The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*, by William Davies. Verso. 320 pages. \$26.95. [versobooks.com](http://versobooks.com).

*24 Hours of Happy*, directed by We Are from L.A. Iconoclast Interactive. 1,440 minutes.

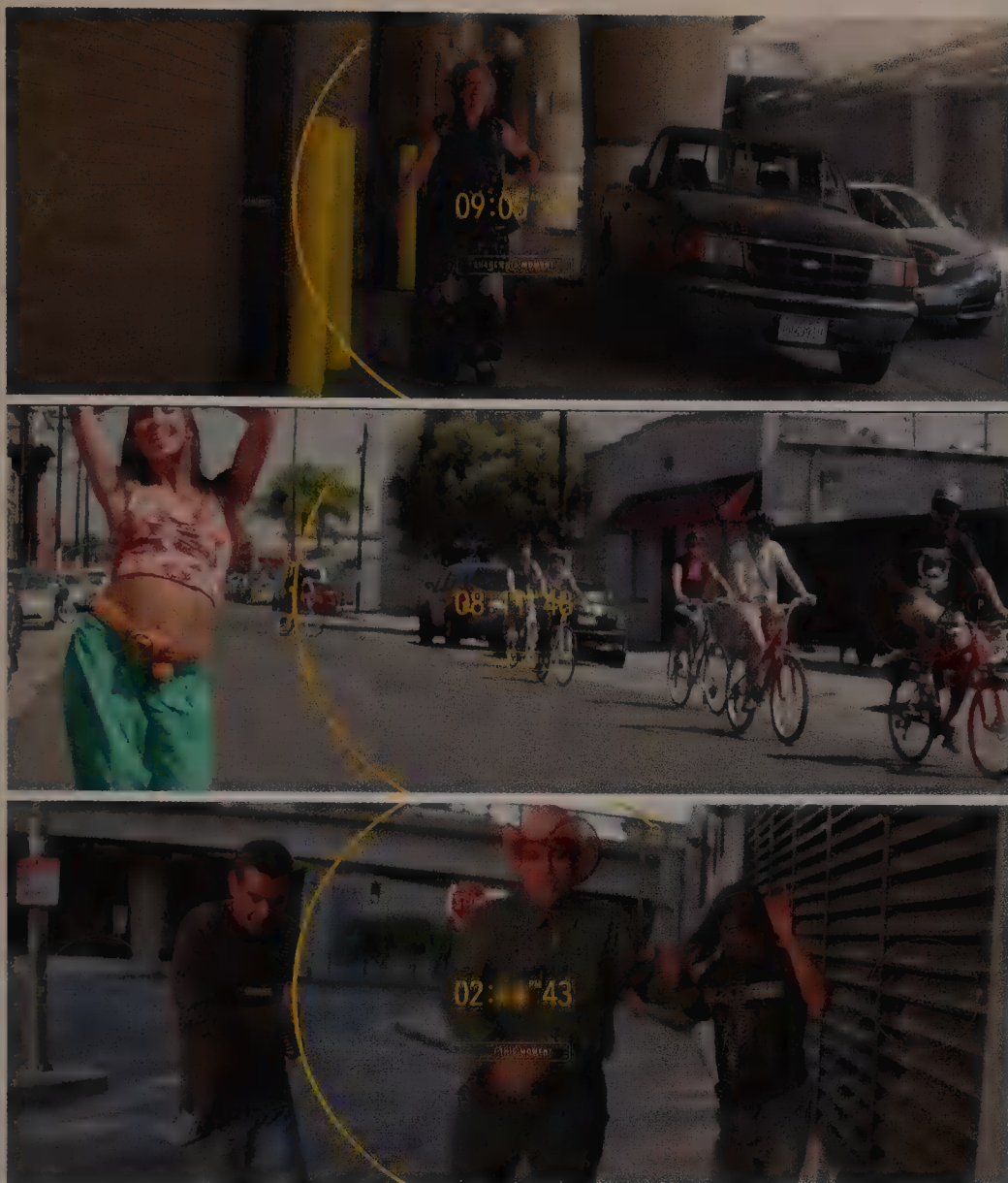
At 9:04 A.M. in the video for Pharrell Williams's neo-Motown hit "Happy," a smiling gray-haired woman in glasses and a flowing flowered dress dances in the parking garage of a Los Angeles skyscraper. Her delight is palpable. With a scarf loosely tied around her neck and a purse on her shoulder, she shimmies and claps, windshield-wipers flat palms back and forth in front of her, points to the sky, and nods when she sings along that "happiness is the truth." More than 400 southern Californians each got four minutes to perform their happiness in the twenty-four-hour-long video, dancing toward a retreating Steadicam down Hollywood Boulevard, through Echo Park and Silver Lake, in Runyon Canyon and in a riverbed, at LAX and Union Station. Some wear the flat, saccharine smiles of television dance-show contestants, but others, like the woman in the flowered dress, shine with what looks like real joy. When her turn is over, the song begins again, and the next dancer enters the tunnel of the camera's view. It's as though "Singin' in the Rain" were the entire movie and the movie lasted an entire day.

Ours is a time of happiness—or at least of happiness studies, happiness summits, and chief happiness officers; a time when books like *The Happiness Solution*, *The Happiness Project*, *Happiness Now!*, and *10% Happier* translate scientific work on "subjective well-being" into personal best practices; a time when it is widely believed that keeping a gratitude journal or dancing down a street can spread pleasure like a virus. *24 Hours of Happy*, Williams's

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remarkable piece of durational pop art, would seem to be a case in point: nearly 2,000 tribute videos have been made around the world, from Iran and the Philippines to Ukraine and the Gaza Strip. This March, to mark the United Nations' International Day of Happiness, Williams was invited to light the top of the Empire State Building the bright yellow of smiley faces and address children in the General Assembly hall on the importance of "a happy planet." Elsewhere, "haptivists" stood on street corners holding signs that read EVERYTHING IS AWESOME, ESPECIALLY YOU AND YOUR HAPPINESS IS PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER. The U.N.'s publicity materials linked such efforts to sustainable development, the eradication of the wealth gap, and the battle against climate change.

I didn't contribute to the more than a hundred million views that *24 Hours of Happy* received last year, and I was puzzled to hear about the Empire State Building lighting, but I am watching the video now, all twenty-four hours of it, as I write this. The video's homepage is bright yellow, too, a color that, researchers say, few claim as their favorite, which may be why McDonald's uses it—to encourage you to eat quickly and leave. The color also appears on the cover of *The Happiness Industry* by the sociologist William Davies, the latest book to resist the idea that we have reached some kind of happiness tipping point. Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright-Sided*, Micki McGee's *Self-Help, Inc.*, and Pascal Bruckner's *Perpetual Euphoria* have all argued, plausibly enough, that our happiness-peddling authors, gurus, and life coaches keep us suspended in a state of permanent



anxiety. The enlightenment on offer, these naysayers argue, has a way of quickly running out, so that we are always coming back for more.

Davies concurs with these critics, but he pushes the argument a step further. *The Happiness Industry's* central concern is the quantification of happiness by policymakers and corporations, and their efforts to “entangle” happiness in “infrastructures of measurement, surveillance, and government.” The book opens at last year’s World Economic Forum in Davos, where happiness and its associated metrics were the order of the day. Forum-goers were given gadgets that sent regular updates about their well-being to their smartphones, and they meditated with the French Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, whose brain scans in a University of Wisconsin lab have revealed off-the-charts positive feeling, leading him to become known as “the happiest

man in the world.” The motivation for the focus on happiness, Davies says, was explicitly stated by several speakers: “24/7 working practices and always-on digital devices had made senior managers so stressed that they were now having to meditate to cope with the consequences.” Happiness strategies were also recruited to alleviate the widely documented dissatisfaction of workers, which, according to Gallup, is costing the United States as much as \$550 billion per year. In Davies’s view, the language of good feeling and scientific utopianism are a cover for an older, more insidious goal: “a single index of human optimization” that would reduce all human experience to qualities that can be diagnosed, tracked, graphed, and, ultimately, controlled. The methods may be new, Davies argues, but this is what the architects of free-market capitalism have wanted all along.

Davies has set himself a difficult but important task: he wants us to think not only about what we’re measuring but also about the methods themselves—what it means for British Airways to try out a “happiness blanket” that turns blue when passengers are relaxed; for Facebook to experiment with making its users happier by changing their news feed; for an arts festival to use surveillance cameras to count the smiles of attendees. He traces these contemporary efforts back to the late eighteenth century, when Jeremy Bentham argued that “the business of government is to promote the happiness of society, by punishing and rewarding.” This central principle of utilitarianism, though, meant happiness had to be measured, and Bentham hoped to surpass the hazy approximations of language and metaphysics. If humans were calculating hedonists, as Bentham believed, then happiness could be measured through the price and pulse of the market and the body.

It would take two centuries of innovations in psychology, economics, market research, neuroscience, and management theory to produce the necessary instruments, and Davies tells a vigorous history of surprising cross-currents among these fields. In 1879 in Leipzig, Wilhelm Wundt built the first experimental-psychology laboratory, seeking a way to study psychic states in the body. He made a tachistoscope, a device for watching subjects’ eyes to ascertain the speed of their attention. He measured blood pressure and heart rate, compared unconscious and conscious reaction times. His lab was visited by American psychologists interested in his methods, though they found him, Davies tells us, too “metaphysical”; he still asked his subjects what they thought. In turn, Wundt called the Americans “economists,” because they did not believe in free will. Not only was Wundt’s lab copied in the United States but some of these visitors became our early advertising theorists, using tachistoscopes to measure emotional reactions to advertisements. Davies goes on to trace the influence of behavioralism on the American Psychiatric Association, of psychological methods on management theory, of Bentham’s assumptions on the birth of neoliberalism at the University of Chicago, of pharmaceutical



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## SOLUTION TO THE JUNE PUZZLE

## NOTES FOR "DIAMETRICODE":

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.  
Note: \* indicates an anagram.

	Q		N		S		U		G		K		M	
J	U	J	U	B	E	C	S	A	Y	O	N	D	E	R
	A	E	T	F	A	H	E	C	R	J	I	R	A	
I	R	I	S	E	S	A	T	T	A	S	S	E	N	T
	T	E	Y	B	I	O	A	O	T	G	H	W	E	
V	O	I	C	E	D	S	X	R	E	U	C	H	R	E
	P	L	B	A	E	K	●	F	D	R	B	O	A	
O	B	L	O	N	G	A	S	R	M	U	S	K	O	X
	L	S	F	R	N	B	K	E	A	S	H	E	U	
B	I	A	F	R	A	O	Y	A	S	H	E	A	T	H
	N	G	E	L	R	O	C	K	S	F	Q	R	L	
A	T	O	N	A	L	M	A	Y	I	P	E	C	A	C
	Z		D		Y		P		F		L		W	

ACROSS: 8. juju-be; 10. C.S.A.; 12. red-no-y, rev.; 14. ro(rev.)-b.s.; 15. r(10)ja\*; 16. char(t); 17. l-rises; 18. hidden; 19. as-sent; 20. thereby, hidden; 22. voi(C)ed\*; 24. \*; 26. untrod\*; 28. skater\*; 29. ob(l)ong\*; 34. m(U.S.-KO)X; 37. Altdorf\*; 38. hidden; 40. hidden; 41. s(heat)h; 43. Lyon\*; 44. (f)rocks; 45. s-wan; 46. hidden; 47. rev.; 48. \*.

DOWN: 1. qu(art)o; 2. hidden in reverse; 3. \*; 4. U-setax\*; 5. \*; 6. sink(rev.)-h; 7. mean(d)er; 9. c(OH)o; 10. ch(O)as\*; 11. hidden; 13. dr-we(rev.); 20. two mngs.; 21. rug(rev.)-U.S.; 23. (w)ills; 25. h(OK)e; 27. ka(b[arri]o)om\*; 28. \*; 30. bli(N)tz; 31. off-end; 32. rang(rev.)-l(andlad)y; 33. spacy-k[I.D.]\*; 34. mass-if; 35. she(Q)el\*; 36. [y]ou-Walt(rev.); 39. [I]ago; 42. hidden.

companies on the explosion of diagnostic categories in the DSM-III.

Greater attention to our well-being on the part of corporations and policy-makers may sound like a positive step, but for Davies this quantification of the self serves a neoliberal agenda that "blames individuals for their own misery, and ignores the context that has contributed to it." Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappo's and author of *Delivering Happiness*, encouraged companies to lay off the 5 to 10 percent of employees who seem least interested in signing on to the "happiness project." In Britain, where a national happiness index is already in place, the unemployed are required to attend positive-thinking sessions, which may involve a government contractor who yells at them, demanding that they "talk, breathe, eat, shit belief in yourself." Happiness thus becomes compulsory: to be counted as useful, we must act like the calculating hedonists we're assumed to be, silencing self-reflection and neglecting metaphysical concerns.

Of course, it isn't only governments and corporations that want to measure our well-being; we do it to ourselves. In the name of health, we've begun to treat our brains as computers we can rewire for optimum happiness. While I was reading *The Happiness Industry* I downloaded Happify, a positive-thinking app. Its home screen shows an image of a brain, whose regions are labeled with goals such as "Elevate Optimism," "Re-pattern Stress," "Fix Relationship Friction." When the downloadable "happiness pack" from the British NGO Action for Happiness—the nonprofit in charge of the U.N.'s happiness-outreach efforts—encourages you to "do something kind for others," the program explains that "research shows that being kind to others increases our own levels of happiness as well as theirs." Dwelling on what hurts in the world prompts your brain to feel more hurt, but you can train your neurons for happiness by lingering over positive experiences and letting negative thoughts pass by. Happify encourages you to write negative thoughts on signs held up by tiny furry beings and then shoot at them with a slingshot, Angry Birds-style. The app's website claims that 86 percent of "frequent users get happier in 2 months."

Meditating, imagining positive events, doing kind deeds and noticing

that you've done kind deeds, calculating your gratitude with your smartphone at the end of each day, delivering laminated letters to people who've influenced you: according to the new technicians of happiness, these things aren't merely good to do for their own sakes; they're good because they change your brain in ways it feels satisfying to count. But the apps and the gurus insist that you must do them constantly. You must organize your day around positivity—to pray, as it were, without ceasing.

Through such rituals of measurement, Davies says, we learn to treat happiness as a kind of personal capital, a currency that allows us to perform as good employees and citizens. Thus the utilitarian project of using money and the body to measure happiness becomes a belief that “a quantity of happiness will yield a certain amount of money,” and that we must train our very bodies to produce that quantity. When we stop believing in the equivalence, we're punished:

It is only in a society that makes generalized, personalized growth the ultimate virtue that a disorder of generalized, personalized collapse will become inevitable. And so a culture which values only optimism will produce pathologies of pessimism; an economy built around competitiveness will turn defeatism into a disease.

**T**here is increasing evidence that we are, as Davies warns, reconstructing society “as a laboratory.” The U.N.'s International Day of Happiness is part of an initiative that started in 2011, when the General Assembly adopted resolution 65/309. The resolution argued that gross domestic product does not “reflect the happiness and well-being of a country.” It charged member states to follow the lead of Bhutan (the first country to employ a gross national happiness index, which calculates not only conventional standards of living but psychological well-being, culture, community vitality, and environmental diversity) by accounting for the role of happiness in development, and to guide policy accordingly. That December, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services convened a panel of experts to develop a

national happiness index. In 2013, Santa Monica won a million-dollar grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies to develop a local well-being index, making it, according to the Bloomberg website, “the first city in the nation to measure well-being and formally embed it in policymaking.” Bloomberg plans to award 100 U.S. cities with grants to help them become “smart cities,” where a constant stream of data might influence policy in real time. In cutting-edge architecture projects, like Hudson Yards in Manhattan, the buildings themselves will collect data on residents’ “wellness and activities.”

Joseph Stiglitz became an advocate of gross national happiness after the 2008 financial crisis. “The crisis was very helpful because people realized the GDP wasn't telling us anything about what was going on,” he told *Time* in 2012. “The crisis has made us aware of how bad our metrics were even in economics, because U.S. GDP looked good, and then we realized it was all a phantasm.” But was the crash a product of too little happiness, too little positive thinking, or too much? In 2006, in the United States, you could get a “stated income” loan without offering any documentation of your income and debts. You could borrow \$500,000 even with a credit score of 500, though your loan would be called “subprime.” This era was, as Ehrenreich emphasizes in *Bright-Sided*, the heyday of the positive-thinking self-help book *The Secret*, which told its millions of readers that imagining checks arriving in the mail or the ability to pay off your loans was all it took to bring the money you needed to your door. A *New York Times* article from 2007 quoted the script used by sales representatives at the biggest of the subprime mortgage lenders, Countrywide Financial Corporation, which was full of displays of empathy: “I want to be sure you are getting the best loan possible,” the representatives would say.

At the same time, Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye's best-selling *Left Behind* books imagined a dystopia in which a secular religion of magical good feelings arose out of the U.N. complete with multicultural performances about global peace and harmony, staged to cover up an emerging world government that was using new technologies to surveil and control its

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citizens. Jenkins and LaHaye's conservative Christian eschatology is eerily close to Davies's critique. The liberal rhetoric of universal good feeling is the language of the Antichrist, of evil itself, the books argued, because it is always a cover for a new mechanism of control.

Is it too optimistic to hope that Davies's argument turns out to be similarly paranoid? Isn't it possible that the movement toward valuing empathy and global well-being, even if enabled by technologies that also allow surveillance, might fulfill an alternative potential, one that sparks revolutionary forms of democratic collaboration? That even quantitative research might help? Yet Davies is correct to argue that fighting the control we think we must exert over our own bodies—by anxiously tracking our every move and state of mind—will require us to read the ideas behind the methodologies and metrics we love to fetishize. Before a recent debate with Davies, the economist Andrew Oswald argued in the *Guardian* that laypeople shouldn't be critical of happiness indexes unless they "know what a fixed-effects regression equation is, and how to read an fMRI scan, and ... truly understand the strengths and weaknesses of the most recent articles on the topic in journals such as *Science*, *The American Economic Review*," and so on. As though there are people who know things, and people who are subjects of study, and Oswald wants the latter to keep quiet in the lab.

**W**e remember Bentham for his utilitarianism but also for his interest in legal reform, and especially for the Panopticon. Inspired by a workshop built by his brother, Samuel, the circular structure he imagined—never built but influential on institutional structures around the world—would place prisoners in single cells around the circumference of a watchtower, so that they might always be watched, or feel watched, or imagine themselves watched. Bentham may have sought to remove metaphysics and slippery words from the effort to decipher the good, but his structure had a certain magic to it: the genius of Bentham's building was that the observed were always uncertain about whether they were being watched or not; a guard didn't even need to be in the tower for

the mechanism to work. The building, the shape itself, created the fiction of an omniscient God, a kind of magical thinking—or magical anxiety—that caused the prisoners to regulate themselves. Michel Foucault noted that the Panopticon created "in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." It was the prototype of the social-psychology laboratory, a place in which the unseen scientist in the watchtower could study and track the behaviors of inmates and guards.

A few days after I last logged on to Happify, the app began sending emails to remind me that its research shows that "people who visit Happify once every 2 to 3 days increase their happiness score up to *three times more* than those who come to the site less frequently." I also received an automatic follow-up email from Action for Happiness, which ended, "We think you are awesome." The sudden, blank language of unconditional appreciation felt like the "love-bombing" that works so well for cults.

I've been trying to watch *24 Hours of Happy* so that the times of day in the video correspond to the times of day when I'm writing this. The video has come to seem like a kind of companion in the solitude of writing, and I've developed strong feelings toward it, of affection or attachment. (A *Pitchfork* reviewer who watched all twenty-four hours worried that he'd developed Stockholm syndrome under the influence of the video.) The song repeats the word "happy" fifty-six times in four minutes, which works out to 20,160 times in total. If you turn the sound off, the dancers start to look like puppets moving to a rhythm that is just a little too fast for them. How strange performances of happiness can be when they all look the same—the spinning, the hand waving, the hopping, the manic jumping. You start to wonder what the directors told the actors about how to look happy. Keep moving. Never stop. The camera holds the performers relentlessly centered as they dance. They never meet the dancers in the other four-minute segments; it's only the song and the camera that connects them. They just keep coming toward you, always toward you, and the camera keeps moving away. ■

# PUZZLE

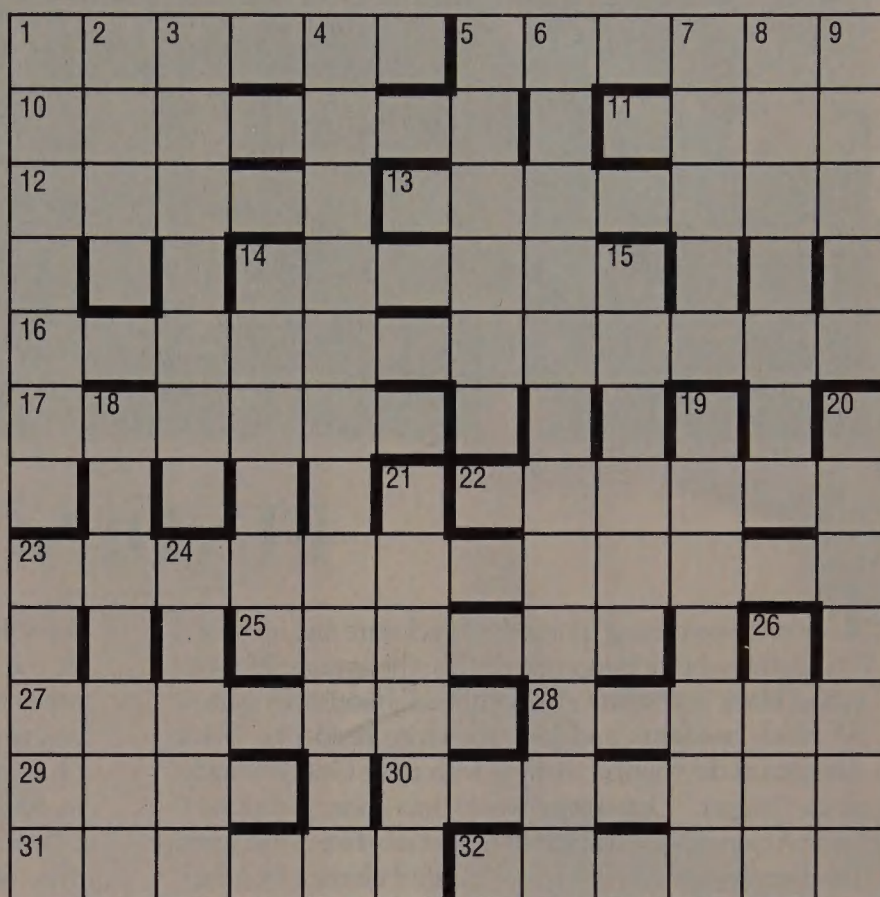
## SIXES AND SEVENS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

(with acknowledgments to Zander of The Listener)

**T**he clues to words of six and seven letters are grouped separately. Solvers must determine where each answer belongs in the diagram, using answers to the numbered clues as a guide.

Answers include eight proper nouns and three foreign words. Among the seven-letter words, (j) is uncommon. As always, mental punctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 92.



### ACROSS

11. Say, "Food, goodbye" (4)
12. Divorced, split—that's the general idea (5)
16. Where to file sketch artists or briefs? (12)
23. Opposed to a church prank, Holder in Los Angeles, left (12)
28. Toymaker's heart's set on kayaks? Just the reverse! (5)
29. Gets out of serious racing cars? (4)

### DOWN

2. Relative to rein in, reordering members (2,2)
4. Ragtag, not courtlier, minstrel (12)
6. Not in a union context, ram a Ritalin capsule inside (12)
7. Girl's goal—to be supported by electrical engineering (5)
9. Washes off not very sensible shoes (5)
23. Caught in bazaar, ghostly word from a pirate (5)
24. Land temperature I'll wager (5)
26. Store from which you can get one parrot (4)

### SIX-LETTER WORDS

- a) Wind and wind online (2,4)
- b) Eccentric girl can't finish it after Friday
- c) Cartoon kid fell down? No, up!
- d) Butch is bored by one, for the most part

- e) Mystical group started reeling, was in the present
- f) Cell-phone app, like Angry Birds and The Disheartened
- g) A right to have refuse placed outside ten times over
- h) Straight, not attached hereto
- i) Star turns, wrong for some Arabs
- j) Rules out where t' get de drinks?
- k) Acted badly with end of paragraph cut off
- l) Gambol, like in dry beds

### SEVEN-LETTER WORDS

- a) Distributing \$100 bills among needy characters, that's a good quality
- b) Ordeals after editing puts more in a magazine
- c) Bearcat members turn out to be musical
- d) Crash dummies for midsizes
- e) Steady, unwavering pinch of the ears
- f) Busted in nest, mob makes a grave decision
- g) Bash in bone—get it together
- h) Given subtle distinctions, it's new on "st" sounds
- i) Better—hence, an improvement
- j) Mammal, bird, or reptile: Am I not ridiculously English

**Contest Rules:** Send completed diagram with name and address to "Sixes and Sevens," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by July 10. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the September issue. The winner of the May puzzle, "Theme and Variations," is Seth Rubenstein, Sacramento, Calif.



## FINDINGS

For every percentage point the foreclosure rate increased during the subprime-mortgage crisis, the average block in mixed black and white American neighborhoods gained 9.6 black residents and lost 4.5 white residents. Black Americans die younger in areas with more Google searches for “nigger.” Democrats would win more elections if black Americans died at the same rate as white Americans. Teachers presented with recurrent misbehavior by imaginary students will judge those students to be troublemakers if they are named DeShawn or Darnell but not Greg or Jake. White Americans with blue eyes are likelier than those with brown eyes to be alcoholics. The U.S. Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association warned that food-safe flavorings may become unsafe when inhaled from e-cigarettes. Happiness creates a signature smell in human sweat that can induce happiness in those who smell it. Test subjects told to discuss their close relationships talk sexier when given 1.5 milligrams of MDMA per kilogram of body weight. Probiotics encourage the Dutch not to dwell on bad experiences. A forensic examiner published a report describing a suicide by eight gunshots to the head. The more mice think, the faster their brain tumors grow. Fidgeting improves learning in children with ADHD. The more autistic a human is, the more androgynous he or she appears. There is no such thing as pure autism. There is no such thing as pure dominance.

Researchers correlated activation of the dopaminergic system in the medial orbitofrontal and medial prefrontal cortices with the passionate stage of romantic love, activation of the posterior cingulate cortex with the sense of having a body, activation of the insula with certainty about the truth of a nontestable proposition, and exceptional activation of the presupplementary motor area and the midcingulate cortex with the extemporizing of British comedians. Neuroscientists explained the psychological underpinnings of suspense by studying responses to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” and Felix Men-

delssohn’s “Venetian Boat Song.” Prominent composers in the nineteenth century died 2.2 years earlier if another major composer lived in the same city. The best way to get a song unstuck from your head is chewing gum. OCD may have first been reported in the ninth century, in Abu Zayd al-Balkhi’s *Sustenance of the Body and Soul*. Scientists urged further study of dance addiction. German women accept virtually no direct invitations to casual sex from average-looking requesters on university campuses or in clubs, but when brought into laboratories and presented with photos of ten men who, they are told, want to have sex with them in a safe environment, consent to sex with an average of 2.73 average-looking putative suitors, as compared with men’s consent rate of 3.57. Middle initials are overrepresented among lead authors of psychology articles.

Evidence of extensive cannibalism, including such practices as marrow extraction and the fashioning of skulls into skullcaps, was discovered at Gough’s Cave in Cheddar Gorge. Chins, which are unique to modern humans, are not useful. Low-back pain is more prevalent among people with chimpanzeelike spines. Female baboons whose bottoms swell the most during ovulation do not necessarily make the best mothers. Female Fongoli chimpanzees are likelier than males to use sharpened sticks to stab bush babies in their tree holes. Alpha-male Sebitoli chimpanzees assume responsibility for looking before they let their groups cross the road. A Dutch chimpanzee knocked a drone from the sky. A Chernobyl fox made itself a sandwich. A wild orphan wallaby died on the Isle of Man. Kansas dams are destroying the peppered chub. Flame retardants may cause hyperthyroidism in old Swedish house cats, and sharp, high-pitched sounds were confirmed to cause seizures in old house cats everywhere. There is no pattern to the undulation of the octopus’s arms. Pollen seeds clouds. The Sichuan bush warbler exists. The Myanmar Jerdon’s babbler persists. ■

“Exit Eden No. 17” and “Exit Eden No. 14,” photographs by Doug Fogelson from the series Exit Eden. Courtesy the artist

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